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THE PEASANTS

WINTER

THE PEASANTS

A TALE OF
OUR OWN TIMES

IN
FOUR VOLUMES

AUTUMN
WINTER
SPRING*
SUMMER†

** To be published April, 1925*
†To be published July, 1925

THE PEASANTS

WINTER

FROM THE POLISH OF

LADISLAS REYMONT

v. 2

ALFRED · A · KNOPF

NEW YORK MCMXXV

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The Peasants has been translated from the original Polish by Michael H. Dziewicki, Professor of English Literature at the University of Cracow. I wish to make special acknowledgment to Dr. A. M. Nawench of Columbia University for his invaluable assistance in seeing the work through the press.

A. A. K.

THE PEASANTS

WINTER

CHAPTER I

WINTER had come.

In the first days, it was but trying its strength—wrestling with the autumn, and howling far away in the livid distance, like some ravenous monster.

Now dawned those chilly glacial days, days of dismal and mournful dejection, lit with a dribbling feeble light; corpse-like days, when the birds flew away to the woods with cries of dread, and the waters babbled fearsomely, rolling sluggishly on, as if palsied by the terror of the cold; and the very country-side seemed to shudder, and all that was therein to look in awe towards the north and its unfathomable depths of clouds.

As yet the nights were as those in autumn, full of dreary sighs and soughs; sounds as of struggling, and sudden hushes; the howl of dogs; the cracking snaps of freezing timber; the sad voices of shelter-seeking birds; horrible calls from weird woodlands and crossways, invisible in the dark; and the beating of eerie wings, and shadows lurking beneath the walls of the stupefied cottagers.

At evening, from time to time, the huge crimson bulk of the setting sun would still peer out of the west, going down ponderously—a globe of molten iron, whence blood-red floods would gush forth, with smoke-like pitch-black vapours rising round them, looking like a grand and gloomy conflagration.

They said: "The winter is growing harder, and ill winds will be rising soon."

And indeed the winter did grow harder—every day, every hour, every minute.

Directly after the fourth of December (the day of St.

Barbara, patroness of a holy death), the first of the winter gales began blowing in short whiffling puffs. They skimmed along the ground, with a baying like that of hounds hot on a trail. They bit into the ploughed fields, snarled about the bushes, worried the snow-drifts, tore at the orchard boughs, swept along the highways, sniffed in the streams; and here and there, with but little ado, they ruined every thatch and fence that was in poor condition. After which they fled, still baying, away to the forest lands; and after them out of the dusk came the great winds on the very same evening, their long sharp tongues lolling out of their wheezy jaws.

All night they blew, howling across the fields like packs of famished wolves. They did their work well, too. Ere morning the stark hardened earth had been quite stripped of its tattered and scattered covering of snow; only in places, in hollows and ditches, could a few white rags be seen on the fences. The fields too had some shiny white spots left; but the roads lay frozen deep—as it were, petrified—and the frost had bitten profoundly into the soil with its keen fangs, so that it resounded with a metallic ring like iron. But with the morning, the gales fled to hide in the woods, where they lurked, tremulous and shuddering.

The sky, too, was now overcast, ever with darker clouds, which came creeping up out of every cavern, raising heads of monstrous size, stretching forth long lean flanks, throwing their grey manes to the winds, baring gigantic discoloured teeth, and coming on in mighty battalions.—From the north: black, huge, all shredded and tattered, piled in tiers, branching out like a score of overthrown forests, one upon the other, separated by deep chasms, and with—so it seemed—great streaks scattered over them of greenish ice, as it were: these rushed forward with wild might and a dull murmuring sound. From the west: those advanced slowly—livid, enormously swollen bulks, which in places shone bright as fire; and they rolled one after another, more and more persistent in their long advance, not unlike flocks of great birds. From the east came sailing flattened,

rusty-hued masses of vapour, monotonously the same, and forbidding to the eye as mouldering carcasses that drip with tainted gore. From the south, too, were wafted ancient-looking clouds, reddish dark in hue, recalling clods of peat, striped and motley to see, though dingy and dull, as if vermin burrowed within them. There were also clouds floating on high, seeming to descend from the pale quenched orb of the sun, and forming dingy wisps, or spreading out in manifold tints, as embers that are dying. And they all came forward, built up mountains of prodigious height, and concealed all the sky under a black seething flood of squalor and grime.

The whole land had suddenly turned to darkness; a dull silence prevailed on every side; all the lights had grown dim; the bright eyes of the waters were glazing over; all beings felt petrified and stood in amazement with bated breath. Up out of the earth surged the fear of what was to come; the frost penetrated even to the marrow of the bones, and every living thing trembled with the terror of it. They saw the hare running through the village, with shaggy fur standing fluffy on end; they saw the ravens alighting with hoarse croaks upon the granaries, and even entering the houses. Dogs howled wildly outside in the yard; men sped in fear to take shelter in their huts: while along the pond the priest's blind mare went to and fro with the ruins of the cart, and struck against the fences, and with a weird cry sought her way back to the stable.

The darkness began to be continual, murky and exceedingly depressing; daily the clouds sailed lower; they came creeping down from the forests, like thick volumes of dust, and rolled along the fields like floods of turbid water: then, coming to the village, plunged all things in a dingy ice-cold fog. And suddenly there would come a rent through the midst of the sky that shone dark-blue like the azure mirror of a well: a wild wind whistled through the dim space, the fogs at once were driven together on either side, and by the shattered gateway thus made came a first loud blast, soon followed by another, a score, and hundreds.

They howled on in troops, they poured forwards in torrents that nothing could restrain; they rushed along as if coming out of broken fetters, in raging bellowing multitudes, striking at the gloom, dispelling it utterly, swallowing it up or sweeping it away like rotten chaff.

And out and far over the fields, in screaming turmoil, was driven the fog as froth before the wind.

The clouds, trampled down by the feet of the pitiless storm, fled and rolled off, to skulk in the woodlands and forests. The sky was swept clean; once more, though with dull and sullen mien, the day peered forth, and every creature drew a breath of relief.

For nearly the whole of Sunday the gales blew on without any surcease or abatement. In the day-time, they were not yet quite intolerable; but the nights became beyond bearing. These fell, bright and starlit, and it was then that the gales played their most furious pranks. Folks did not say (as they do when the wind is high): "Sure someone has hung himself," but: "Fivescore men must be hanging now!" What with the howling, the banging, and the creaking as of a thousand empty wagons dashing at a gallop over hard-frozen ice, no one could sleep a wink.

The huts creaked likewise. Often and again did the storm come driving at the corners, heaving up the thatches, butting at the doors: sometimes even breaking in the panes so that they had to get up at night and stop them with pillows: for it then rushed in with a sound like the squealing of noisy swine—bringing along with it such fierce cold as benumbed the inmates under their eiderdown quilts.

None can say what the villagers suffered, in the course of those days, of those nights.

Nor what harm was done abroad. The blasts bore down the fences, plucked off the thatched roofs, and—at the Voyt's—blew down a shed that was all but new. They tore the roof from Bartek Koziol's granary, and carried it away more than a furlong's distance into the fields; they threw down the chimney at the Vincioreks'; they wrenched a good bit of boarding from the mill-roof: and as to the multi-

tudes of minor losses, and the many trees uprooted in the orchards and woods, who can tell them? Why, upon the highway alone, they tore up and cast across the road about a score of poplars, that lay like as many murdered and pitilessly mutilated corpses!

The oldest inhabitant could not remember when the winds had been so hostile and done so much injury.

Folk therefore kept at home, wrangling together beneath the smoky rafters of their own cabins; for it was no light matter to show one's nose round the corner. Some of the women, however, being less patient, would at times cautiously step outside their enclosures and visit their gossip-loving neighbours: ostensibly to spin in company, but in reality to whet their tongues and give vent to their ill humour. Meanwhile, the men were threshing stubbornly on behind the closed granary-doors, and from morning till late at night the flails smote upon the floor. The frost had nipped the corn; and so the grain was more readily threshed out.

These gales brought with them more and more biting frosts. With mighty strokes they had frozen all the brooks and streamlets. The morasses were now solid. Even the mill-pond was coated over with a sheet of bluish transparent ice. Only close to the bridge, where the water grew deeper, was it still in motion: all the rest of its banks were fettered by the ice, and openings had to be cut for drawing water.

No change of weather came till St. Lucia's day.

Then the frost slackened somewhat; the winds paused to take breath: they swept the plain more seldom and with less boisterous fury; the grey sky grew smooth as a well-harrowed field's vast hempen-coloured surface, and so low that it seemed resting on the poplar tree-tops along the road.

But presently, after the noonday Angelus, the frost increased a little and the snow fell in large flakes.

Dusk then came earlier, and the snow still fell thicker and thicker, though drier and more powdery, until the night closed in.

By morning the snow was three good spans deep; it covered the whole land like a fleece, veiled it under its own white expanse, shaded with bluish tints; and still it continued to fall without intermission.

And so great a stillness came over the land that no noise, no sound pierced the masses of down, now floating to the ground. All had grown silent, dumb: as though, by some miracle, all things had stopped in awe, listening to the all but inaudible rustle of the falling flakes, so quietly floating earthward—a dim flickering whiteness, unceasingly descending!

The night was now a whitish obscurity, a glimmering, pearly, immaculate dawn, like the finest bleached wool on earth; this glimmering from out of the infinite abyss—as it were, the frozen shimmer of the light of all stars, condensed and ground to dust in its downward flight from heaven—now besprinkled the whole country; and soon the pine-woods were shrouded, the meadows disappeared, the highways vanished, and all the village was lost in the silvery haze and blinding dust, and nothing more was to be seen but streams of sifted snow, wafted down as still and smooth and soft as cherry-blossoms in a moonlit night!

At three paces' distance, there was no making out either huts or trees or fences, or any human face; human voices alone, like butterflies on wearied wings, flitted about in the nebulous whiteness.

This went on for two whole days and nights. In the end, the cabins were all snowed up, and rose, each like a snow-covered hill, with a long tress of smoke waving from its top. Roads and fields had become one vast plain: the orchards were all filled with snow, even above the tops of the enclosures; the pond had become quite invisible beneath the avalanche and, in place of the ground, there was but a pale, flat, impassable, miraculous plain of down.

The snow fell still, though now more dry and scantier. At night the stars would twinkle athwart its curtain: by day, at times, the blue sky would show beyond the whirl of floating specks and flitters; voices sounded more sonorous

and came no longer muffled through the veil. The village seemed to wake up a little, and folk began to stir themselves. Some even attempted to drive out in sledges, but soon returned, finding the ways impracticable. Here and there, they dug paths through the snow from cabin to cabin; every heart rejoiced. Especially the children were beside themselves with delight; and dogs rushed about everywhere, barking, licking the snow, and scampering with the urchins, who swarmed on to the roadways, clamoured in the enclosures, shouted, pelted one another with snowballs, built horrible monsters, and dragged each other about on toboggans; their joyful cries and merry sports filled all the place with din. Roch had to give up teaching that day, for keeping them in the house over their primers was impossible.

About the third day, the snow ceased as twilight fell; and though there were still a few flakes, they were like the shakings out of an empty sack of flour—nothing to speak of. But the sky was overcast, crows flapped their wings about the houses and alighted on the roads; the night came down starless and leaden, its obscurity diminished only by the whiteness of the frosty snow—and as still as one shorn of strength to the uttermost.

"Let but the slightest wind spring up, and we shall have a snow-storm," muttered old Bylitsa the next morning, as he peeped out at the window.

Hanka lit the fire on the hearth, and looked into the passage. It was early yet: all over the hamlet, the cocks were crowing. The twilight was still dusky, as if lime and soot had been mingled and spread over the world; but in the east there glowed a heap, as it were, of ash-covered embers.

The cold in the room was so keen, so damp and bitterly piercing, that Hanka had to put on her clogs in the house over her bare feet. On the hearth, there was scarce any fire at all; the green juniper brushwood only crackled and smoked. Hanka hacked a few chips off a board, poked some straw under them, and at last got the fire to blaze.

"Enough snow has fallen for a whole winter," the old

man said again, blowing on the window, crusted over with a thick coating of greenish ice.

The eldest boy, now entering on his fourth year, began crying in bed; and from Staho's lodgings on the other side of the hut, angry voices, the weeping of children, and the slamming of doors were heard.

"Oh, Veronka is already at her morning prayers!" Antek remarked satirically, as he wound round his legs the bands he had previously warmed at the fire.

"Ah, well," the old man mumbled, "she has learned to talk—and she talks. A little too much perhaps, but she means no harm."

"Means no harm! And does she mean no harm when she beats her children? Does she mean no harm when she leads poor Staho a dog's life, with never a good word for him?" Thus Hanka made reply, as she knelt down by the cradle to suckle her little baby, which was crying and kicking its legs about.

"Since we came, three Sundays have gone by: not one day has passed without a quarrel and fighting and curses. She a woman? No, she's a brute. . . . But Staho too is a mollycoddle, who lets her swinge and cuff him at will. He works like a horse, and she treats him worse than a dog."

The old man cast a deprecating look at Hanka, and was about to say a word in Veronka's behalf, when the door opened and Staho himself, flail on shoulder, peeped in.

"Antek, will you come and thresh? The organist told me to get someone for his barley, which is dry and good, and comes splendidly out of the husk. . . . Philip begged me to take him; but if you will, here's work for you."

"Thanks kindly," was Antek's reply; "but I am not going to work at the organist's. Philip will do very well."

"Please yourself. Good day."

At her husband's refusal, Hanka had started up; but she at once bent down, her head over the cradle, to hide the tears that gushed forth.

"What! in this fearful winter, so poor that we have only a few potatoes and salt, and having not a stiver to bless

himself with . . . he refuses work offered! Sits all day long in the hut, smoking cigarettes and brooding! . . . Or else roams and prowls about like one distraught, seeking . . . what? The wind perhaps? O my God, my God!" she sobbed in her distress. . . . "And now, even Yankel will trust us no more: and we shall have to sell the cow. . . . True, it is not beseeming that he should work on another peasant's land. . . . But what—what can we do?—Lord! were I a man, I would not spare myself nor shirk toil, but work till my arms dropped. . . . Alas! poor thing that I am, what can I do?" And she set about her household duties, now and then casting a furtive glance at Antek, who sat close to the hearth, with his eldest son on his lap, wrapped in his sheepskin, and chafed his little feet with a hand warmed at the fire, but sighed and stared moodily into the blaze the while. The old man was peeling potatoes at the window.

Silence had arisen between them, disquieting, pregnant with hidden griefs, and heightened by the stifling sensation of misery. They would not look into each other's eyes, nor talk; their words trailed off into plaints, their smiles faded and went out; in their looks flamed suppressed reproaches; in their pallid emaciated faces harsh feelings were to be read, and their minds burned with bitter resentment. Three weeks had passed since they had been turned from Boryna's door: so many long days and nights, and they had every detail of the expulsion yet distinct in their memories. The injury was a fresh as ever, the stubborn sense of revolt as strong.

The fire was now burning merrily, and its warmth spread through the room, till the frost melted on the window-panes, and the snow in the chinks outside the hut trickled down in water, while a little moisture oozed from the hard-beaten floor.

"Those Jews . . . are they coming?" she asked at length.

"They said they would."

And again not one word more. Indeed, who should speak first? Should Hanka? . . . She, who durst not open her

mouth, lest the gall that filled her heart should flow forth in spite of her!—Or Antek? What had he to say? That he was miserable? They both knew that. He never had been prone to make friends; and as to pouring out his heart, even to his own wife, he had no wish to do that! Besides, how could he speak, now that his soul was eaten up with hatred, and every memory made him writhe and clench his fists in such rage that he would willingly have vented it upon the whole village!

He now treasured no longer the sweet recollection of Yagna, any more than if he had never known her, than if he never had held in his arms the girl whom he now could tear in pieces.

And yet what he felt was not hatred. "Some women" (thus he thought of her) "are like stray dogs, always ready to follow anyone who offers a bigger morsel, or shakes a stick to be obeyed." Even these thoughts were not very frequent: in presence of the avalanche of deadly wrongs done him by his father, he forgot hers. The old man was guilty of all: yes, it was his father—the villain, the tyrant, the thorn in his side that ever rankled deeper and more cruelly! —it was through him—through him!—that all had come to pass.

Every evil inflicted, every suffering that he had undergone in these days, was garnered up in his bosom, and formed a horrible rosary of pangs and tortures; but he incessantly told the beads in his mind, that his memory of them might be fresh.

Of his poverty he made little account. He was a stalwart fellow: needed but a roof over his head, and no more.

"Let my wife," he thought, "see to the children."—What stung him above all the rest was the utter injustice shown to him. This he felt, continually more inflamed, as the rubbed sting of a nettle. What! In but three weeks, all the hamlet had come to look upon him as though he were an unknown intruder. No one spoke to him, no one looked in at his door, nobody had even a word of kind greeting for him. He felt himself an outlaw.

Well, if they did not come, he was not the man to beg them. But neither would he hide in a corner—far less yield an inch of the way to any. If they cared to have a fight, why, then, let them have it! . . . But now, why was all this? Because he had fought his father?—Aha! was that unheard of in Lipka? Did not Joseph Vahnik fight his father every other day? Had not Staho Ploshka broken his father's leg? And yet no one had a word of blame for either! No, it was only he they were shocked at. Of course: "Whom God favours, His saints favour too"; and Boryna was as a god in Lipka!

All that time, breathing only revenge and the thought of it, he had lived on in a fever of excitement. He did not take to work, lost thought of his poverty, forgot all about the morrow: broken down after the agony gone through, he merely crawled hither and thither—a self-tormentor everywhere. Now and again he would rise in the night, to go about and roam along the roads or crouch hidden in dark corners, dreaming of vengeance, and swearing that he would never forgive.

They took breakfast together without one word; and he sat with eyes of bewilderment, ruminating the past—thorny bitter provender, hard to chew!

By now the day was getting on, and the fire had gone out. A cold whitish light from the snows outside shone through the partly thawed panes: the chilly dismal glare lit up every nook and showed the room in all its wretched nakedness.

Heavens! By the side of such a hut, Boryna's cabin was a mansion. Nay, any of his father's out-houses, even the cow-byre, was fitter for human abode. It was a foul sty, not a dwelling-place; a heap of rotted logs, dried dung, worthless rubbish! Not a single board to cover the bare ground, whose clay was honeycombed with holes filled up with frozen mud and sweepings, whence an odour worse than a manure-heap exhaled whenever the fire-place warmed the room. Above this quag of a floor rose the walls, warped and mouldy down which the damp trickled, and in whose

dark corners the Frost shook his hoary beard: walls with numberless holes, stopped with clay—or even, in some places, straw and cow-dung. The low ceiling hung down like a torn old sieve; there were fewer boards in it than holes, stopped with bundles of straw. Only the furniture and household utensils, together with the holy images on the walls, to some extent concealed this state of dire destitution; whilst the great press, and the horizontal pole across the room on which the clothes were hung, hid the wickerwork partition that separated the room from the byre. . . .

Hanka soon got through her work, though she had not to hurry: one cow, a heifer, a young pig and a few geese and fowls forming all her live stock, and indeed all her wealth. She dressed the boys, who presently went out into the passage to play with Veronka's children; the sound of their frolics was soon heard. Then she tidied herself up a little, as she expected the dealers, and would have to go to the village afterwards.

She particularly wished to talk the matter of the sale over with Antek beforehand; but she could not venture to speak first. He, still sitting by the fire that burned no more, was staring into the distance with a mien so sombre that it made her afraid.

What could it be that ailed him?

She took off her clogs, lest their clatter might annoy him, and cast in his direction more and more frequent glances full of affectionate disquietude.

"Ah," she thought, "it is harder, far harder for him than for other men!" and a great desire came over her to question him, to try and guess his sorrows, and mourn over them with him. Already she was standing by his side, ready with words of kindness, welling up from her loving heart. But then, how could she speak to him, if he paid no more heed to her than if she were not there? She heaved a sigh, for her heart was very heavy. Good God! how much better off so many another woman was—even though without a roof she could call her own! Should he raise his voice—nay, even his hand—against her, well, she would at

least know she had a living man by her side, and not a log of wood. "But he! . . . Not a word! Now and then he growls, as an angry dog would—or looks at me so that my blood runs cold. I cannot talk with him, nor open my heart in converse with him at all. A wife—what is that to him? A pair of hands to tidy the cabin—to cook his food—to nurse his children! Does he care for me in any wise? ever caress me, pet me, treat me tenderly, or even chat with me? All that has no interest for him: he keeps his mind aloof from all around him, makes himself as a stranger, and succeeds so well that he sees nothing that goes on. Yes, let the poor wife bear every burden on her own shoulders: suffer alone—come and go—trouble about all things: he will never pay her with one gracious word!"

She could no longer keep back her tears, the bitter overflow of her grief, and went out to the byre beyond the partition wall, where, leaning against the manger, she wept in silence; but when the cow Krasula, with a deep breath, set to licking her head and shoulders, she burst out into loud lamentations.

"And I shall lose you too, my poor beast! . . . They will come. . . . They are coming. . . . They will bargain for you . . . and then throw a rope round your horns . . . and lead you off, you that give us our food!" she murmured low, putting her arm round its neck, and turning with all the affection of her wounded heart towards this creature that felt for her.—No, this could go on no longer.—The cow was to be sold; then there would be nothing for them to eat! . . . And he refused to seek work! Had they not asked him to thresh? and he would not go. He might have earned one *złoty* ten kopeks daily. . . . That would have at least bought salt, and a little lard to make up for the milk that was to fail them now.

She returned to the dwelling-room, ready to speak her mind.

"Antek!" she cried, in a hard, determined voice.

Silently he raised his bloodshot eyes to hers, with a gaze of such immense anguish and sorrow that she was over-

whelmed with dread, while her heart thrilled with compassion.

"Did you say they had come for the cow?"

"They are surely on the way; dogs are barking down there."

"No, that is in Sikora's enclosure," she said after having gone out to look.

"They promised to come in the forenoon, and we have only to wait."

"Oh, *must* we sell?"

"Alas! we want money, and our pasture-land is not enough for Krasula and the heifer too.—Yes, we must, Hanka; what's to be done? I am sorry to lose the cow," he went on in a low voice, and with such sweetness of tone that Hanka felt spellbound, while her heart went pit-a-pat with great joy and hope: at that moment, she cared neither for the loss of the cow, nor any of their other misfortunes. And she gazed earnestly into his beloved face, listening to that voice of his which entered into her like a flame, and kindled such delightful feelings within her.

"Ah, yes, we must. Well, the heifer remains to us. She will calve about Mid-Lent, and so we shall have a little milk then," she chimed in, wishing only to hear him speak further.

"And if we should lack provender, we'll buy some."

"Oat-straw perhaps: our rye will last till spring.—Father, pray open our potato-pit: we must see if the potatoes we have are not frost-nipped."

"Father, stay where you are, the work is too hard for you: I'll do it."

He rose, took his sheepskin down from the pole, and went outside.

The snow was almost as high as the roof, for the cabin stood in an open place, almost out of the village, a field's length from the road, and with neither hedgerow nor orchard to keep the snow away. Several wild gnarled cherry-trees grew in front of the windows, but they were so buried in the drift that their branches alone stood protrud-

ing like human fingers twisted and bent by some disease.—Earlier in the day, the old man had already cleared away the snow in front of the cabin, but he had at the same time covered the mound [1] so deep that it was impossible to distinguish it in the snow.—Antek set vigorously to work: the snow stood as high as a man, and—though lately fallen—it had caked together and hardened so much that it had to be cut out in lumps; and he sweated enough ere the potato-pit was dug open. But he worked willingly, now and then throwing a few flitters at the children, who were playing outside the threshold. At times, however, he would pause in his work to lean back against the cabin-wall and look around. Then he would heave a profound sigh, and his soul would once more go astray like a sheep lost in the shadows of the night. The sky was all covered with a whitish cloud, which hung at no great height. The snows lay extended like a huge soft fleece, forming, as far as the eye could reach, an immense plain, white with a tinge of blue; the air, misty with suspended crystals of frost, seemed to wrap the whole world in a delicate pellucid tissue. As Bylitsa's hut was on rising ground, one saw thence the whole village spread out in a bird's-eye view: those lines of snow-clad mounds, like huge mole-hills, straggling away in long strings round the pond, none completely bare, but all hid by the white sheet spread over them. Here and there a granary wall stood out, darkly prominent; ruddy-brown coils of curling peat-smoke went up; or a few trees peered out, grey beneath the dazzling mantle in which they were enveloped; and athwart this world all of silver tinges, voices travelled swift and sharp, heard together with the flails' monotonous *rutta-rutta-rutta,* drumming underground, as it were. The ways were all snowed up; no one fared along them, nor did any living thing darken the silvery expanse of the fields. The hazy distances melted into one another, so that sky and earth were undistinguishable, save where the forest

[1] Over the potato-pits, dug deep as a protection from the cold, mounds are raised to protect them still more effectively.—*Translator's Note.*

made a faint blue stain on the white, as if some cloud were hanging at the horizon.

Antek's gaze wandered but for a little while over those snowy wastes; it presently returned and sought his father's cabin; and in the search his attention was diverted by a cry from Hanka, who had gone down into the potato-pit.

"Ha! they are not frozen! Vahnik's store has been so frost-bitten that half must be given to the swine to eat; and ours—ours is quite untouched!"

"That is good news.—Pray go out and see, for if I mistake not, the Jews are coming at last, and we must take the cow out of the byre."

"You are right: it is the Jews—who but they? Yes, it is.—Poisonous creatures!" she exclaimed with abhorrence.

Along a pathway just visible by the marks of Staho's boots, made when he went out in the morning, there came two Jews from the tavern, heavily plodding along, followed by half the dogs in the village (that greatly enjoyed this opportunity to bark at them) until Antek arrived and drove them away.

"Oh, how do you do?—We come late, on account of the snow.—Such drifts!—No driving through them, no getting through on foot even, I tell you. They have had to employ forced labour to make the road passable through the forest."

To these attempts at conversation he replied nothing, but made them enter his hut to warm themselves a little.

Hanka, having cleaned the cow's soiled flanks and milked away what had gathered since the morning, brought her through the room into the yard. The cow made resistance, unwilling to go out; on passing the threshold, she sniffed, stretched her head forth into the air, licked the snow, and on a sudden burst into long plaintive lowing, pulling so hard at the rope that old Bylica could scarcely hold her.

Hanka broke down. Seized with an unbearable pang, she burst out crying, as did the children too, holding to their mother's skirt.

Nor was Antek in much better mood. He ground his

teeth, leaned back against the cabin wall, and stared doggedly at a lot of crows that had assembled on the snow dug from the pit. The dealers meanwhile jabbered in Yiddish to each other, and proceeded to feel the cow and examine her critically.

The whole family, sick at heart, turned away in deep dejection from the beast tugging at her halter and vainly looking to her masters with great frightened eyes, and lowing in vain.

"O Lord!—Was it for this, Krasula, that I fed you so well, and cared for all your wants, that these men should now take you to the slaughter-house, and destroy you!" And in agony she struck the cabin wall with her head.

Alas! Wailing and lamenting were of no avail; for "What needs must be—no man can flee," as the saying is.

"How much?" the elder of the couple, a grey-bearded Jew, asked at last.

"Three hundred *złoty*."[1]

"What! for that scraggy brute—three hundred?—Anthony, is aught the matter with you?"

"Scraggy? Say ye no such word, or ye shall rue it! Scraggy! Look but at her—so young—scarce in her fifth year—and in such goodly condition!" So spoke Hanka, enraged.

"Pshaw! Pshaw! Who doth business, a word shall not anger him.—Say thirty roubles!"

"I have spoken."

"And I shall speak. Thirty-one? . . . Well, thirty-one and a half.—Thirty-two?—Then let it be thirty-two and a half. . . . It's a bargain?"

"I have said."

"My last word: three and thirty!"—"Take it or leave it," added the younger Jew phlegmatically, looking round for his staff, while the elder buttoned up his gaberdine.

Thereupon Bylitsa said, patting the cow's neck: "For such a beast as this!—O men, fear ye not God? A cow as

[1] In view of the bargaining that ensues, this must be counted as 45 roubles.—*Translator's Note.*

large as a byre!—Why, her hide alone will be worth half a score of roubles—O ye swindlers! ye murderers of Christ!"

But now the Jews began to chaffer eagerly, violently. Antek stood stubbornly to his price; and though he gave way a little, it was but little. Indeed, the cow Krasula was very valuable; and had he been selling it in spring and to another peasant, he would have got fifty roubles at least. But "Necessity drives to the mart, with Poverty drawing the cart." This the Jews were perfectly aware of; and though they shouted louder and louder, and struck their hands in Antek's with greater zeal to conclude the bargain, their offers rose by at most half a rouble each time.

Finally it came to this pass, that they started home in high dudgeon, and Hanka was leading the cow back to her shed, while Antek himself was angered and ready to renounce selling the beast at all—when lo! back they came again, and shrieked and swore that they could not possibly offer a higher price, and struck their hands in Antek's again . . . till at last the man agreed to forty roubles, plus two *złoty* for old Bylica, as the holder of the rope.

They paid on the nail; the old man led the cow after them to the tavern where their sledge was waiting. Accompanied by the children, Hanka went with Krasula as far as the road, stroking her muzzle every now and then, affectionately bending over her, and quite unable to conceal her grief and affliction. . . .

She stood long upon the road, looking at Krasula as she was led away, and pouring out execrations on those unchristened "Yellow Ones."

To lose such a cow as Krasula was!—No wonder if the poor woman felt her bosom overflow with gall!

When she came back, she said: "It is as if one of us had been borne to the churchyard"; and she still continued to peep into the empty stall, or to gaze through the window at the pathway marked by the hoofs which had but now passed there; and often and often did she give way to her distress, and shed tears again and again.

"Now then, will you have done?" Antek cried out, seat-

ing himself at the table where the money lay. "Why, the woman is for all the world like a calf; doth naught but weep and blubber."

"'He that suffereth naught will for nothing have thought,'" was Hanka's reply. "You suffered nothing, when you gave poor Krasula up to those Jews to be butchered."

"Aye, you'd rather have me open my own bowels to get you money!"

"And now we remain like the very last of hired servants—like *Dźiads*—without one drop of milk, without one crumb of comfort! This—this is what my share of my own house and home have earned for me.—Merciful heavens! Other men work as hard as oxen, and bring something home; and this man sells the very last thing—the cow, my marriage portion, all I had from my family!" she went on in uncontrollable excitement.

"Being a fool and without understanding, you may bellow at your ease.—Here's money for you. Pay what you owe, buy what you need, keep the rest." He pushed the roubles over to her, but, taking five from the heap, put them into his pocket-book.

"And why take so much money with you?"

"Why? I am not going to start off with nothing but my staff."

"Start off? and whither?"

"Anywhither, if it be but away from here. I will seek work, and not rot here in Lipka."

"*Away?* A dog is barefoot everywhere.—'Where'er the póor man goes, the wind against him blows.'—Ah! and I am to stay here alone, say? Am I?" And, raising her voice, she approached him with a threatening mien, not knowing what she did; he meanwhile took no notice of her, occupied as he was in taking down his sheepskin, putting his girdle on, and looking for his cap.

"Work for the peasants here? That I will not," he declared. "No: though I should starve; I will not!"

"The organist is in want of a thresher."

"That great man!—A calf who bleats in the choir, and is good for naught else; whose eyes are always on the farmers' money-bags, and who lives on what he gets out of them by begging or by lying!"

"'Who has no goodwill shirks his duty still!'"

"Enough! You're saucy!" he cried out in anger.

"When do I say a word to oppose you? You always do as you please, and I am nowhere!"

"I shall apply at the manors," he said presently, in a gentler tone. "I mean to inquire about service to be had, and perhaps may get something by Christmas. But I would rather be a common ploughman elsewhere than rot here, where the wrong done me stares me in the face at every step. That I cannot bear. I have enough of it—enough of being pitied by some, and looked upon by others as a mangy dog!" As he spoke, he waxed angrier and more highly wrought and Hanka, seized with terror, stood petrified and motionless: she had never yet seen him in such a state.

"Farewell. I shall return in a few days."

"Antek!"—The word was a despairing scream.

"What would you?" He turned upon the threshold.

"Do you grudge me even a friendly parting word?"

"Is it caresses you mean? Oh, I am in no mood for them just now." And he went out, slamming the door.

Uttering a hissing sound between his shut teeth, he walked on quickly through the snow with his staff. The crisp surface crunched underfoot. He looked round at the cabin. Hanka stood against the wall, dissolved in tears; through the other window, Veronka was watching them.

"Good for nothing in the world but weep, weep, weep again!—Now, forwards and away!" he said, with a glance that swept the snowy wilderness round him. Seized with a strange longing, he felt himself urged on, rejoicing in the thought of unknown hamlets and a new life in a fresh world. The feeling came upon him unexpectedly, and bore him away, as a suddenly swollen torrent carries with it a weakly-

rotted shrub, that can neither make head against it nor remain motionless.

An hour before, so far from making up his mind to go, he had never so much as entertained the thought. Ah! but now he would fly—fly away like a bird, go anywhither—to the forests, aye, and to the undreamed regions beyond them. Truly, why should he stay here to waste his life? what had he to expect here? The memories of the past had eaten him up, dried his heart: for what reason, then, should he cleave to them?—The priest was a good man, and had pointed out clearly to him that he stood no chance in an action against his father, which would besides be costly.—Vengeance?—That might wait till the right time: no man had ever yet wronged him with impunity. So now . . . let him go on —straight before him, no matter whither, if far enough from Lipka!

But whither first of all?

He now stood at a bend of the poplar road, gazing, not without some hesitation, over the fields which faded in the misty remoteness. "I shall go through the village and along the road beyond the mill." And he at once started that way.

Half a field's length before striking off the road, he had to turn aside; for under the poplars and down the middle of the way a sledge was rushing straight in his direction, with a cloud of snow-dust and a sharp jingling of bells.

It was Boryna, driving with Yagna. The horses tore along with lusty hoofs, the body of the sledge tossed like a feather behind them. The old man whipped them besides to make them go faster, and urged them on. He was speaking some words, too, and laughing! Yagna was talking in a loud voice, when she suddenly beheld Antek. Each for an instant looked into the other's eyes—and then had gone past. The sledge flashed by, and was engulfed in the snowstorm it had made; Antek stood in the same spot, looking round at them, and motionless. Now and again they appeared out of the cloud of snow-dust; Yagna's dress

fluttered red in the wind; now the bells would tinkle louder, and again fainter, inaudible, lost somewhere on that vast white plain, beneath the arch of frosted boughs and between the colonnade of dark trunks that sustained them. . . . These stood, as it were, drooping in a row, in their long and weary uphill procession towards the forest. But Antek was always aware of her eyes. They floated before him; they appeared, in the midst of the snow—everywhere—with that look of terror and of sadness; dreamy and pleased at once; keen of glance and laden with the hot fire of life!

He felt his soul extinguished, so to speak, veiled in a mist, frosted over and chilled to the core: but the deep-blue eyes were shining bright within him. Hanging his head, he dragged himself on with slow steps. More than once he glanced round, but nothing was visible beneath the poplar colonnade, save the blur of a snowy whirlwind fleeing away with a tinkling of far-off bells.

Oblivion of all things came over him, as though he had lost his memory by some strange happening. He stared helplessly, not knowing what to do . . . or where to go . . . or what had come to pass. He was as one in a dream —a waking dream, which he cannot shake off.

Almost unconsciously, he got to the tavern, passing several sledges full of folk, amongst whom he recognized no one, though he looked carefully.

"Where is that crowd of people bound for?" he asked Yankel, who was standing in the doorway.

"For the court. There's a lawsuit with the Manor about a cow, and herdsmen assaulted: you know the affair. Those are the witnesses; Boryna started before."

"Will they win?"

"Why should anyone lose? The complaint is against the Squire of Vola, and the Squire of Rudka is to be judge. Why should a Squire lose?—Besides, the folk will have an excursion, will improve the roads, will enjoy themselves; and the townsmen too need to do some business. So everybody will gain a little."

Antek was not listening to Yankel's mockery. He

ordered some strong vodka and, leaning against the bar, stood musing there for a full hour, without even tasting the liquor.

"Is anything ailing you?"

"What should ail me?—Let me into the private bar."

"Impossible. Dealers are there—great merchants, who have purchased another clearing from the Squire; that in Vilche Doly. They must have rest; nay, it may be they are sleeping now."

"I'll pull the scurvy rascals out by their beards!" Antek cried, and rushed madly to the private bar; but ere he got there, he changed his mind, and took his bottle to the darkest nook in the room.

The tavern was empty and still, save for the Jews talking together in their jargon, Yankel running to serve them, or someone coming in to order a glass, toss it off, and withdraw.

It was now past noon, and the frost no doubt increasing; for the sledge-runners creaked in the snow, and the tavern grew colder. But Antek remained in a brown study, unable to make out what was going on within him and around.

He took a dram, then another; but those eyes! They were always with him—dark-blue, turquoise-blue!—and so very near that his eyelids all but touched them.—A third dram, and they grew brighter still, and seemed to whirl about, as lights borne from one part of the room to another! —A cold shudder went through him; terrified, he started to his feet.

"Pay up, you!" shouted Yankel, blocking the way out. "Pay up! I give you naught on trust."

"Out of my way, you dog's-blood Jew, or I kill you!" Antek shrieked, with such furious violence that Yankel changed colour and shrank away to let him pass.

He banged the door and rushed out.

CHAPTER II

TOWARDS noon it had cleared up a little, but only as if a rushlight had been kindled and whisked about among the shadows; what brightness there was vanished soon, and it grew dark again, and looked as if the snow were gathering and about to fall once more.

In Antek's hut it was extremely murky and cold and cheerless. The children played upon the bed, and prattled in whispers to each other. Hanka was so uneasy, she knew not what to do. She went fidgeting about the place, or stood outside with burning eyes, gazing over the snow. But neither on the road nor in the fields did any living creature meet her sight; only a few sledges were just visible, crawling away from the tavern to vanish both from the eye and the ear, lost in the abyss of limitless white.

She sighed. If there were but a beggar passing by, that she might have someone to speak to!

She set to calling together the fowls that had dispersed, seeking to roost on the cherry-trees, and made them return to their usual roosting-place; but, on going in, had some words with Veronka. What did it mean? The woman had set down in the passage a pail of hog-wash for her swine, which the dirty beasts had splashed about, and there was a large pool right in front of Hanka's door!

Without going in, she cried through the closed door: "You who hold yourself such a good housewife, see to your pigs, or tell your children to do so. I will not dirty myself with mud for your sake!"

"Oh, she has sold her cow, and so she is going to raise her voice here, is she? She cannot bear mud now, the grand lady! Yet her dwelling is a pigsty!"

"Never you mind about my lodgings or my cow!"

"Then never you mind about my pigs; do you hear?"

Hanka slammed the door: what could she reply to such a fury? One word said to her was sure to bring more than twenty in return.—She bolted the door, took out the money, and began to make up her accounts with infinite trouble, blundering again and again. She was still upset; full of resentment against Veronka, of disquietude about Antek. Often, too, she fancied she could hear Krasula lowing; and then at times memories of her girlhood at home came back to her.

"True it is, though, too true, that our dwelling is like a pigsty!" she muttered, looking about the room.—But *there!* . . . There they had a floor, and the walls were whitewashed, and all was warm and clean, and everything was in abundance. . . . And the work there, was it much? . . . Yuzka washed the things after dinner; Yagna spun, or looked out of the bright frostless windows. . . . What did she need, that she had not? . . . All the corals of Boryna's deceased wives were hers now; and petticoats, and kerchiefs, and linen in plenty. She had not to trouble, not to earn anything, and could eat her fill of fat things! And Staho had said, moreover, that Yagustynka did all the work for her; that she lay in bed till broad daylight, and had tea for breakfast, because, forsooth, "potatoes did not agree with her!" . . . And the old man did nothing but make love and fondle that woman as if she were a little child. . . .

The thought roused a storm of rage in her; she started up from the chest she sat on and shook her fist.

"Oh, the spoiler, the harpy, the wanton, the trull!" She screamed so loud that old Bylica, dozing close to the fireplace, started up in alarm.

She was calm in an instant. "Father, pray cover the potatoes with straw, and then heap the mound with snow: there is going to be a hard frost," she said, and returned to her accounts.

But somehow the old man's work did not get on. There was much snow, and he had little strength.—And then, he

felt uneasy: he had held the rope, and two *złoty* were for him: should he have them? They had been lying there on the table, glittering and almost new, as he well remembered.

"Perhaps they will give them to me," he thought. "To whom else do they belong? My arms are stiff with holding the rope, Krasula pulled so hard; I held on nevertheless. . . . And how I praised her to the cattle-dealers! Oh, I made them hear me! . . . Peter, the eldest boy—I should buy him a mouth-organ at the very first local feast. . . . And the younger one too should get something. . . . And Veronka's little ones too, naughty troublesome brats though they are. . . . And for myself, some snuff—strong—such as stirs one's inwards! Staho's snuff is good for little, does not even make me sneeze."

But these musings affected his work so much that when Hanka came round in an hour's time, the straw was only just covered with snow.

"Why, you eat enough for a man, and work less than a child!" she said.

"Ah, Hanka, I am working hard, but I just stopped a moment to breathe: I shall finish instantly—instantly!" he stammered, greatly abashed.

"The twilight is coming down from the forest, the frost is growing harder, and the pit looks as if swine had been rooting there. Go ye into the hut and tend the babes."

She herself set to work, and with such energy that the pit was very soon covered up and splendidly heaped over with snow.

But when she had done, it was already dusk; the dwelling had become colder; the damp clay floor, stiff with the frost, clattered beneath her clogs; and once more the frost painted its patterns on the panes. The children, too, whimpered low; but she did nothing to quiet them, for she was in haste. She had to cut straw for the heifer, and feed the pigs, that came squealing and nuzzling against the door, and give water to the geese. Besides, she must go over the accounts again—find how much she was to pay, and to whom. At last all was done, and she prepared to go out.

"Father, you will light the fire, and take care of the babes.—Should Antek come back, there is cabbage for him in the saucepan on the hob."

"Yes, yes, Hanka, I shall see to everything.—The cabbage is on the hob; yes, I shall see, I shall see to it."

"Ah!—About the rope-money, I have taken it. You do not want it, surely? You have food to eat; you have clothing. . . . What more do you need?"

"Yes, Hanka, yes; I have everything—everything," he replied in a low voice, turning quickly round to the children, lest she should see his tears fall.

As she went out, the cold gripped her. A bluish darkness was spreading on every side, dry and peculiarly transparent. The sky was clear as crystal, with unclouded horizon, and a few stars already twinkling on high.

On her way, Hanka mused. She thought she would try to find some sort of work that Antek could do, and not let him go away.—But now his last utterance came back to her, and made her faint with alarm. For never in her life could she leave her village to live elsewhere; no, never could she abide among strange folk!

She gazed on the road, the houses scattered along it, the orchards scarce seen above the snow, and the immense fields all around, now growing grey in the twilight. The silent ice-cold evening fell faster and faster: star after star came out, as if someone up there was sowing them by handfuls; and upon the glimmering earth, glimmering in snowy-white expanses, the cabin lights began to shine, smoke shed its scent through the air, men went slowly about the ways, and voices seemed skimming very low along the ground.

"All this has grown into me, is part of me; and I will not stray about the world like a wandering wind. Oh, no!" she said with energy to herself, walking now somewhat slower; for from time to time she met with caked snow that broke and let her in up to the knees.

"This is the world which our Lord has given me—mine! Here will I live and here will I die.—If we can but hold out till the spring! . . . Say that Antek refuses to do any

work. Well, I shall not be forced to beg. I will take up spinning—or weaving—or anything I can turn my hand to, and not let misery conquer me. Veronka, I know, earns enough by her weaving to put money by."

Such were her thoughts as she entered the tavern, where Yankel was as usual nodding over a book. He paid no attention to her till she set the money before him; then he smiled in friendly wise, helped her to reckon the sum right, and even offered her some vodka. But he said no word to her either of Antek's debt to him or of the man himself, until she was about to depart; when he asked her what her husband was doing.

She replied that he was seeking work.

"He would be useful in the village. They are putting up a saw-mill here, and I need someone experienced in carting timber."

"My husband would never go into tavern service."

"Is he such a great man as that? Then let him slumber and sleep!—But ye have some geese: if ye will, fatten them a little, and I will purchase them when yule-tide comes."

"I cannot sell any; I have but enough for breeding."

"Then buy some goslings for the spring; as soon as they are well fed up, I'll take them. And if you care, you may have all on credit here, and you will pay me in geese.—A running account . . ."

"No, I shall not sell any geese."

"Oh, but you will, when the money from your cow is gone . . . and sell them cheap, too!"

"Scurvy one! you'll not live to see the day!" was her mental comment as she went out.

The air was so frosty now, it made the nostrils tingle. The heavens were scintillating, and a bleak piercing blast blew from the woods. Nevertheless, she kept her course right in the middle of the road, gazing with interest at all the cabins. Vahnik's, next the church, had all the candles lit; from Ploshka's enclosure came a hum of voices and the

squealing of swine; at the priest's, the windows shone bright, and several horses pawed the ground impatiently in front of his veranda; at the Klembas', too, opposite the priest's, lights were gleaming, and you could tell, by the crackling of the crunched snow, that someone was going to the byre. Further, in front of the church, where the village forked out and seemed stretching forth two arms that clasped the pond in their embrace, but little met the eye beyond a few lights on a dusky white background, in which dogs were heard to bark.

Heaving a sigh as she glanced over at her father-in-law's cabin, she turned off from before the church to pass between two long fences that separated Klemba's orchard from the priest's garden, and together formed a road leading to the organist's. This was little trodden and so much overshadowed with underwood on either side, that ever and anon showers of snow fell on her from the trees she brushed against.

The dwelling was situated in the background of the priest's court-yard, and had no other separate cartway.

Hanka was presently aware of an outcry and the sound of sobbing, and beheld outside the entrance a black box and various articles scattered on the snow—a feather-bed, some wearing-apparel, and so forth. . . . Magda, the housemaid at the organist's, stood by the wall, crying bitterly and screaming aloud.

"They have turned me out! They have driven me forth! Like a dog! Out into the world, the wide, wide world! Whither shall I go now—bereft of all—oh, whither?"

"You swine, you swine, scream not thus at me!" cried a voice from the open entrance-passage; "or I'll take a stick, and make you hold your peace pretty quickly. Begone this instant, and betake you to your Franek, you jade!—Ah, how are you, Hanka? . . . My dear, this business you see was to be expected since autumn. And I pleaded with that wench, I talked to her, implored, watched over her; but who can guard a wanton? When we all were sleeping, out she

would go a-walking . . . and has walked so well that now she has a bastard for her pains!—How often did I say: 'Magda, take care; consider: the man will never marry you' . . . and she would declare to my face that she had naught to do with him! And when I saw the creature changing form and swelling like leavened dough, I said to her: 'Go to some other hamlet, hide yourself, ere people see your shame.' Did she listen? No.—And to-day, while milking in the byre, she was taken with great pangs and upset the milking-pail; and my girl Franka ran to me in a fright, crying out that something had befallen Magda. Good Lord! such a disgrace, and in my house!—Take yourself off now, or I'll have you cast out on to the road!" she cried again, coming out in front of the house.

Magda left the cabin wall and, with many a sob and moan, set to making all her things into a bundle.

"Do come in now; it is cold.—But you! leave no trace behind you!" shouted the dame, as she went in.

She led Hanka in through a long passage.

There was a very large low room, lit by a big fire that burned bright on an open hearth. Red as boiled crayfish, the organist, in his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbows, sat baking altar-breads at the fire. Every now and then he dipped a ladle into a dish of thin half-liquid paste, and poured the contents into a cast-iron mould, which he then closed, squeezing it till the hot paste hissed.[1] He then placed it on the fire, supporting it on an upright brick set there, and, opening and turning it round, took out the newly baked bread, which he cast upon a low bench just by. Here sat a little boy, trimming the edges of each of the oblong loaves with scissors.

[1] This is the instrument used to make the Altar-breads (or Communion Breads well known outside the Catholic pale, but much thicker; the Catholic Altar-breads are semi-transparent).—In Poland, the organist goes round the parish at Christmas-time, offering packets of these breads with his good wishes, and receiving such gifts as may be offered to him. This practice naturally entails some contempt towards him on the part of peasants.—*Translator's Note.*

Hanka greeted them all, and kissed the hand of the organist's wife.

"Sit down and warm yourself.—And now, what news?"

Unable to find at once the words she wanted, and feeling ashamed, she gave a timid side-glance into the other room, where, opposite the door, and on a long table, stood a white pile of altar-breads, pressed down with a board. A couple of girls were making them into packets, each tied with a paper wrapper for distribution. From the unseen portion of the room came the monotonous tinklings of a harpsichord twangling under some unknown performer's fingers—and suddenly breaking off with a jarring discord that gave Hanka gooseflesh and made the organist exclaim:

"There, there—quite wrong: you've 'eaten a fox!'—Repeat from *'Laudamus pueri.'* "

"Are you making these for Christmas already?" she asked, feeling it would be discourteous to sit silent.

"We are. The parish is big and straggling; and, as all the altar-breads have to be taken round before Christmas, we must begin betimes."

"Are they of pure wheat?"

"Pray taste them."

She gave her one that was still hot from the mould.

"I scarcely dare to eat of it." She took it with a corner of her apron, holding it up to the light with awed and respectful scrutiny.

"Why, what curious designs are stamped upon it!"

"On that first circle, to the right, you see our Blessed Lady, St. John, and our Lord. On the other there is the manger, the rack, the cattle, the Child on its couch of hay, St. Joseph, and again our Lady; and here are the Three Wise Men, kneeling." Such were the explanations of the organist's wife.

"Yes, yes; I see.—Oh, how wonderfully these designs are made!"

She wrapped the altar-bread in a kerchief and put it in her bosom.—A peasant had entered and told the organist something; at which he cried:

"Michael! They have come for a christening: take the key and go to the church. His Reverence knows and will come, but Ambrose must stay to serve the company."

The harpsichord became mute, and a tall pale lad passed out of the room.

"My brother's orphan boy. Practises to learn playing with my husband, who teaches him gratis. We must make a sacrifice, and do something for our own flesh and blood."

Little by little, Hanka became more communicative, and at last brought out the story of her sufferings and troubles, though piecemeal and with much hesitation. It was the first time she had been able to speak openly of all that had passed.

They listened and talked to her with sympathy; and though they took good care not to mention Boryna's name, they showed her so much sincere compassion that it made her weep very copiously. Now the organist's wife, being a clever intelligent woman, understood what Hanka wanted, and came out the first with a proposal.

"Listen: you may perhaps have a little spare time.— Would you spin some wool for me? I thought I would get it done by Pakulina, but 'tis better you should do it."

"May God reward you! I was indeed in want of work, but durst not ask for it."

"Well, well, no thanks: folk ought to help their neighbours. The wool is carded, and weighs about a hundred pounds."

"Yes, I shall spin it, and am well able. Why, when with my parents, I not only spun thread but wove cloth and dyed it. We never had to buy garments."

"Look at it: how soft it is! and how dry!"

"'Tis beautiful wool. From the Manor sheep, belike."

"Ah, and should you happen to need flour or groats or pease, pray let me know; you shall have all you want, and I will settle when I pay you."

She then took her into a store-room full of sacks and barrels of corn, and flitches of bacon hanging from the walls. The rafters bore long skeins of spun yarn in

clusters, and on the floor thick rolls of linen cloth lay piled up. As to the strings of dried mushrooms, the cheeses, the jars crammed with various good things, the shelves groaning under huge round loaves, and the other articles of household consumption, who could tell them all?

"You shall have the smoothest yarn that hands can make," said Hanka. "And thanks once more for all your kindness. But I fear I shall be unable to carry all that wool by myself."

"It will be taken over to you."

"That is well, for I have still to go about the village."

She again thanked her, but now with something less of warmth and expansiveness: envy was gnawing at her heart.

"'Tis our people gives them all they have, carries it to them, and produces the same . . . and their store-rooms overflow by our gifts! Besides, who knows how much money they have out at high interest? Ah, 'Who has sheep to shear, he shall have good cheer.' . . . It were harder work for them to produce all this.—Well, well!" So she thought on her exit from the house, whence Magda had now disappeared with all her things; and as it was getting late, Hanka quickened her pace.

Where—and of whom—could she inquire about work for Antek?

When on her father-in-law's farm, she had found everybody friendly; people were constantly coming to visit her, either to get some service done or to exchange kind looks and words. And now there she was, standing out in the cold, and knowing not to whom she could go!

She stopped in front of Klemba's, and of Simon's too: but she was loath to enter, for now she recollected how Antek had told her not to make any calls. "People can do nothing, and will give no assistance—only pity; and that they would give just as well to a dead dog!" he had said.

"How true, oh, how true he spoke!" she said, remembering the organist and his wife.

Oh, had she but been a man! She would have set to work at once, and put everything to rights. She would not then

have had to whine and lay bare her wounds that her neighbours might pity her!

She experienced in her soul a devouring, a ravenous craving for work, and such a concentration of force as stiffened her frame and gave firmness and speed to her steps. She also felt a longing to pass near her father-in-law's cabin, were it but to look at the premises from without, and satisfy the desire of her eyes! But in front of the church door she turned away to follow a narrow path that led over the frozen pond to the mill; and she walked fast, not looking to right or left—careful only not to slip on the ice, determined to pass swiftly by and see nothing, lest her heart should be wounded again by the remembrance of the past. But she failed. Somehow, just opposite Boryna's, she stopped suddenly, and could not take her eyes away from the lights that glimmered in the windows.

"It is ours—ours! . . . How can we possibly go from here? . . . The blacksmith would seize it instantly. No! I do not budge hence. Here shall I stay, like a watch-dog, whether Antek stays or not! . . . His father is not immortal; and other changes too may come about. . . . I will not see my children despoiled, nor will I go from the village." These thoughts passed through her mind, as she gazed upon that snow-covered orchard, and the faint outlines of buildings beyond: the silvered roofs, the dark-tinted walls, and—in the background, behind a shed—the sharp cone of a haystack.

The night was still, cold, black-hue, oversprinkled with a sand of stars, it seemed, and wrapping the snowy earth in silvery folds. The trees stood drooping under the weight of snow that bent them down, as if slumbering incomprehensibly in the stillness which flooded the world: white-sheeted phantoms, vapoury, yet rigid. Every voice had died away; only something—was it the breathing of those entranced inanimate trees? was it a murmur from the quivering stars?—something there was that trembled in the air. And there stood Hanka, forgetful of the minutes which went

by, forgetful of the sharp intolerable cold, her eyes staring on that homestead, greedily drinking the sight of it, taking it all into her heart, absorbing it with all the strength of her insatiable dreams.

A sudden crackling in the snow woke her up: someone was coming by the same path across the pond, and in a little she looked upon Nastka.

"What, you, Hanka?"

"Why such amazement? Am I dead, and is it my ghost you see?"

"What fancy has taken hold of you? I had not seen you for a long time, and was surprised.—Which way are you going?"

"To the mill."

"My way too; I am taking Matthew his supper."

"Is it a miller's trade he is learning there now?"

"A miller's? No, indeed! They are building a sawmill here in such great haste that they are now working at it even at night."

They walked on together, Nastka prattling away, but careful to say no word about Boryna; and Hanka, though she would have been glad to hear, feeling that she could not possibly ask.

"Does the miller pay well?"

"Matthew gets five *złoty* fifteen *groschen*."

"So much as that?"

"No great wonder, since he is at the head of everything."

Hanka said no more till, passing in front of the smithy, whence a ruddy light flowed through the unpaned window, crimsoning the snow, she muttered:

"That Judas! Never in want of work to do!"

"He has engaged an assistant, and is himself continually travelling. Also he is with the Jews in that forest business, and occupied with them in deceiving the people."

"Do they cut down the clearing yet?"

"Are you dwelling in the woods, that you do not know?"

"Not so; but I am not greedy for village news."

"Well, let me tell you, they are cutting down a bit of the forest that was already bought."

"Of course; our folk would never permit them to fell the trees on our clearing."

"Even for that, who would interfere? The Voyt holds with the Manor folk, and the Soltys too, and all the wealthier men."

"True. Who is it can get the better of a rich man? or who can overcome him?—Well, Nastka, pray look in at our home."

"Farewell.—Yes, I shall bring distaff and spindle one of these days."

They separated in front of the miller's dwelling, and Nastka went on to the mill, down below, while Hanka passed through the yard into the kitchen. She had great trouble in getting there; a number of dogs swarmed round her, barking and driving her to the wall. Eva came to protect her and usher her in; and just then the miller's wife arrived, saying:

"If you have business with my husband, he is in the mill."

She met him coming back to his house; he took her to the family room, where she immediately paid all she owed for meal and groats.

"You are living on your cow, hey?" he said, throwing the money into a drawer.

"What would you have?" she replied, offended. "One cannot live on stones."

"Your goodman is a sluggard, let me tell you."

"So you say. But what work is he to do? where? with whom? Tell me."

"Are no threshers needed here?"

"Of course such work is not to his taste; he was never yet a common farm-labourer."

"I am sorry for the man. He's headstrong, without respect for his father, and fierce as a wolf; all the same, I am sorry."

"I—I have heard—that you, Sir Miller, have work to be

done; perhaps you might employ Antek. . . . I beseech you . . ." Here she fell a-weeping and imploring him very earnestly.

"Let him come.—Mind, I do not ask him. Work there is, but hard work. To hew the trees into logs—ready to be sawn."

"That he can do: few men in the village as well."

"That's why I say, Let him come.—But you, my woman, you do not look after him properly. Not at all."

She stood amazed, having no idea of what he meant.

"The fellow has a wife of his own. Children too. And yet he is running after another man's wife."

Hanka turned white; the words were a thunderbolt.

"It's true what I say. He wanders nightly. Has been seen out more than once."

Her relief was immense, and she breathed freely again. She knew all about it . . . how he was driven to wander by the memories of the wrongs suffered. Oh, she understood him well! but the folk had painted things the colour they preferred.

"It may be that work, if he sets to it, will drive love-making from his mind."

"He is a farmer's son . . ."

"Oh, yes! Quite a Squire, is he not? And he would pick and choose, just like swine before a full trough. If he is so hard to please, why did he quarrel with his father? why run after Yagna? For think of the sin and the shame of it!"

"Sir!" she exclaimed, hastily. "What on earth are you thinking of?"

"I only say the thing that is. All Lipka knows. You may ask," he rapped out jerkily, in a loud voice; for he was a very impulsive man, who always liked to blurt out things just as they were.

"Well, but may he come here?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"He may. To-morrow, if he cares.—What ails you? what are these tears for?"

"Nothing . . . nothing but the cold."

And she went away, with slow, heavy footsteps, scarcely able to crawl along. The world had grown dark for her, the snow was grey now, she could not find the path she came by, and tried in vain to brush away the tears that were freezing on her lashes. So she walked on, wrapped in darkness, very sudden—and dolorous—O Lord! how dolorous!

"He, in love with Yagna! . . . With Yagna!" She stood breathless, her heart fluttering like a shot bird.

"But perhaps it is a falsehood; the man may have lied!" In her fright she clung to this possibility and clutched at it with both hands.

"Lord! was there not enough of misery and humiliation already, but this—this too must fall upon my wretched head?" She gave way to her grief for a moment, moaning aloud; then, to overcome it, began to run as though wolves had been on her track, so that she entered her hut all panting and more dead than alive.

Antek had not returned.

The little ones were on their grandfather's sheepskin, spread out as a rug before the fire-place, and he was making a little windmill to amuse them.

"Hanka, they have brought wool—brought it in three sacks."

She opened them, and at the top of one found a loaf, some bacon, and at least half a gallon of groats.

"God bless her for her generous heart!" she said, much moved, and thereupon prepared a plentiful supper, and afterwards at once put the children to bed.

The whole cabin was very quiet now. On Veronka's side they had gone to bed already, and her father had fallen asleep in his pallet near the fire. But Hanka remained in front of the hearth and span.

She span long and far into the night, even to the first cock-crow, and as she twisted the thread, so too she revolved in her mind the miller's words: "He is running after Yagna."—Yagna!

The spinning-wheel hummed busily, monotonously, tranquilly. Night, with frozen face, looked in at the window,

and rattled at the panes, and sighed, pressing close against the wall. The cold came creeping out of the corners, caught at her feet, spread itself in hoary blotches over the clay floor; crickets struck up their ditty, somewhere behind the hearth, and only held their peace when either of the children cried out in his sleep or turned in his bed. Yet more intense grew the frost, clutching all things and pressing them in his iron claws: many a time did the planks overhead crack and creak, and fissures were cloven in the old bulging walls with a noise like a pistol-shot, and fibres in some beam broke, with a rull report. Surely the cold had penetrated even to the house-foundations; they shuddered at times, it seemed, with the pain of it, and the hut itself shrank together, crouching and quaking in the dreadful frost.

"Why did the thought of this never come to me? Aye, she—so well-favoured, so well-knit, so comely to behold! And I—a poor thin creature, merely skin and bones! Have I the power to attract him? dare I even try? If I should give my heart's blood, it were naught: he cares no whit for me. What am I to him?"

Helplessness, still but torturing—how cruelly torturing! —now took possession of all her being. She was even beyond shedding tears. She felt as if she were a shrub that the frost is killing, that is as unable to avoid its doom as to cry for help or to protect itself: anguish was riving her soul as the frost rives the shrub. Resting her head on her wheel, she dropped her hands and looked out into vacancy, musing on her lot. Long, long did her reverie last, with only at times a few burning tears falling from her heavy eyelids on to the wool, there to freeze into a rosary of anguish—tears, as it were, of blood.

The next day she rose somewhat calmer. This was of course; the storm had had time to blow over. What the miller said might or might not be true; but should she droop and complain, now that everything was on her shoulders—the children, and the house matters, and all the trouble and woe?

Who would see to things, unless she did? She knelt down

before our Lady of Sorrows, and prayed fervently; and, begging our Lord to set things to rights, she made a vow that she would go on foot to Chenstohova in the spring, and have three masses said, and—as soon as she should be able—take a great lump of wax to the church for tapers to be made of it.

Greatly relieved by this vow, she was able to do plenty of spinning; but the day, though bright and sunny, seemed immeasurably lengthy to her, and her anxiety about Antek increased.

He came at last, but only in the evening, at supper-time, and looking so worn and subdued, and greeting her so kindly! He had bought some rolls for the little ones.

She almost forgot her suspicion. And when he also went to cut straw for fodder, and helped her with the animals, she felt tenderly and deeply agitated.

However, he neither told her where he had been nor what he had done, and she did not venture to question him.

When supper was over, Staho came in: a thing he frequently did, in spite of Veronka's prohibition; and a little later, quite unexpectedly, who should drop in but old Klemba? They were not a little surprised, for since their expulsion no one in the village had been to call upon them yet: it seemed clear enough that he had come on some business or other.

But he told them quite simply that he had come to see them because nobody else came.

They were sincerely and deeply grateful.

Sitting one alongside of the other on the bench in front of the fire, they then entered into grave and serious conversation, while old Bylica now and then put more fuel on the hearth.

"A pretty sharp frost, is it not?"

"So sharp," said Staho, "one can hardly thresh without sheepskin and gloves on."

"The worst is that wolves are about!"

All stared at Klemba in astonishment.

"Oh, 'tis quite true. Last night they were at the Voyt's, burrowing under the sty. Something must have frightened them away, for they did not get at the pig: but the burrow ran quite beneath the foundations; I went myself at noon to see. There must have been five of them at least."

"That, beyond all doubt, betokens a hard winter."

"Yes, the frosts have only just begun, and behold, the wolves are here!"

"Near Vola," Antek said, with much animation, "on the road beyond the mill, I saw tracks of a whole pack, crossing the way slantwise; but I fancied they were the Manor hounds. Very like, they were wolves."

"Went ye as far as the clearing?"

"Not so; but I hear it said they are only felling the wood bought close to Vilche Doly."

"The keeper told me the Squire will not take a single man from Lipka to work there: punishing them, I suppose, because they stand up for their rights."

"Who is to cut down the trees, if not the men of Lipka?" Hanka asked.

"My good Hanka, there are folk in plenty seeking work, begging for work. Are there few in Vola itself? few in Rudka? and in Debica, are the paupers fewer? Let the Squire but lift up his voice: he will find hundreds of able-bodied peasants who will swarm round him the very same day. So long as they fell trees only on the purchased land, let them do so by all means; there is but little of it, and besides, it is too far from our village."

"What if they set to work on our[1] forest too?" Stach inquired.

"That we will not permit!" Klemba replied, briefly and with emphasis. "We will fight it out, and the Squire shall learn who is the stronger—he or all the people. Yes, he shall learn."

[1] *Our* here means only, of course, "that part of the forest on which we claim to have a right to cut wood for fuel, and which the Squire cannot sell without our permission."

Here they dropped the subject, which was a matter too burning to please anyone; but not before old Bylica had, in stammering and hesitating tones, had his say about it:

"I know that generation of the Squires of Vola, I know them well: they will steal a march upon you somehow."

"Let them try," said Klemba. "We are not little children. They shall not succeed." And no more was said.

Then they spoke of Magda, and how the organist had expelled her. Here again, Klemba gave his decision:

"Aye, the deed was not very charitable. But then one cannot force them to set up an infirmary in their home for Magda, who is neither kith nor kin to them."

The talk then became desultory, and the guests left them somewhat late. As he went, Klemba, after his short-spoken and simple fashion, told them, "if they lacked of aught, just to let him know, and he would behave as a neighbour should do."

And now Antek and his wife were alone.

Hanka hesitated a long time; but at last, after many timorous catchings of the breath, she asked him if he had found any work.

"No. I was at more than one manor, and looked about me there, and among the folk too; but I found nothing." This he said with a low voice and eyes on the ground; for though he had indeed wandered about, he had done nothing more, and made no attempt to get work.

They went to bed. The children were asleep by this time; they lay at the foot of the bed for the sake of greater warmth. Darkness reigned, save for the moonbeams that darted through the sparkling frozen panes and threw a luminous band obliquely athwart the room; but the two could not sleep. Hanka tossed from side to side, considering whether she had better tell him about the sawmill now, or wait till the morrow.

"Yes, I went seeking work. But even had I found something, I would not have left the village. To go astray about

the world like a masterless dog is not to my liking." So he whispered, after a protracted silence.

"Why, that is just what I too was thinking—just the very same as you!" she said joyfully. "Why go away and seek for bread, when we can get quite good work here at home? The miller assured me he had something for you to do at the sawmill, and that you might begin to-morrow. You would get two *złoty* fifteen *groschen!*"

"What?" he snarled. "Did you go a-begging to him?"

"No, no," she explained in much fear. "I only went to pay what I owed him; and he told me himself he intended to send for you."

Antek did not answer. The two lay motionless and speechless side by side; but sleep fled from their eyes. They were thinking, thinking, down in the mysterious depths of their minds; sometimes breathing a sigh, or at others letting their souls melt away in the dull dead stillness. Outside, far, far and faint on the country-side, they heard dogs baying, and cocks flapping their wings, and crowing at midnight, and the muffled murmur of the wind soughing overhead.

"Do you sleep?" She crept a little closer to him.

"No.—Slumber has forsaken me."

He was on his back, his hands clasped behind his head. So near her! yet in heart and thoughts so far off! He lay very still, almost without breathing, forgetful of everything; for once more Yagna's eyes shone out of the dark—deep blue in the moonlit night.

Hanka approached him yet nearer, and rested her burning face upon his shoulder. No suspicions now remained in her heart, nor any regrets, nor the least drop of bitterness; only true love, faithful affection, full of trust and self-surrender. And she came close—close to his heart.

"Antek," she asked him with a thrill of eagerness, "will you go to work to-morrow?" She was so fain—so longing to hear his voice, and converse with him, heart to heart.

"Perhaps I shall. Yes, I must go; I must." But his mind was filled with other thoughts.

"Pray, Antek, go. Go, I pray you." With a tender appeal, she put her arm around his neck, and sought his lips, which hardly breathed, with the burning kisses of her mouth.

Not the least emotion did he feel. He paid no heed to her embraces, he was not even aware of her at all, as with eyes wide open he gazed into those other eyes—Yagna's eyes.

CHAPTER III

IT was not very early in the morning when the miller took Antek on as a workman, and, leaving him in the yard amongst great piles of logs, went to Matthew, who was just then getting some timber placed in the sawmill, and setting the saws in motion. After a few words with him, he called out to Antek:

"Then you are to work here, and obey Matthew in everything: he is my deputy." So saying, he walked away, for a very bleak and piercing wind was just then blowing from the river.

"I suppose you have no ax?" Matthew inquired, after coming down and greeting him in a friendly way.

"I have brought a hatchet: I was not aware . . ."

"You might as well use your teeth. The wood is frozen hard, and brittle as glass: a hatchet would not bite into it. For to-day, I'll lend you an ax; but you will have to whet it. And to a flat edge, mind.—Bartek, get to work with Boryna and let this oak-log be ready presently: the other will have been sawn in no time."

From behind an enormous log that lay in the snow, there rose up a tall and wiry but stooping figure of a man, wearing clogs and red-striped trousers with a pipe in his mouth, a grey sheepskin cap on his head, and a tawny leather furred jacket on his back. Resting himself on his ax, he whistled through his teeth, and exclaimed merrily:

"We are going to be wedded together. All right. We shall be a happy pair, and never fall out or fight!"

"A fine forest. The trees are as straight as tapers."

"Aye, but full of knots all the same. 'Tis awful . . . as if the timber had been sown with flints. The days are few, when the ax is not notched by them. You mustn't

sharpen your ax quite smooth, but draw it along the grindstone, whetting it on one side only. That makes the edge stronger, you see. And deal with the iron as when you want to manage somebody—you find which way he is to be taken, and how; and then you lead him like a dog on a string.—The grindstone is in the mill, by the groat-bin."

In a very short time indeed Antek was at work, cutting off the projecting spurs, and hewing the log to a rectangular shape along marks made with tar by Bartek. But he was taciturn and moody, and resentful of having—he, who was a Boryna!—to do the biddings of such a one as Matthew.

"Not bad, your work, not bad at all!" Bartek remarked.

And indeed his work was excellent: the art of fashioning logs was not unknown to him. But it was hard labour for one unaccustomed to it, and after a time he was out of breath, and perspiring to such an extent that he took his sheepskin off. But the frost was hard and held pitilessly; he had constantly to stand and work deep in the snow; his hands were so benumbed, they almost stuck to the ax-handle, and the time seemed so long to him, he could scarcely hold out till noon.

Yet he would take neither bite nor sup for dinner, only dry bread and river water; nor would he even enter the mill, for fear lest he should meet some acquaintance, come to bring corn and awaiting his turn. He stayed out in the frozen air, sitting close to the wall as he crunched his bread and gazed up at the sawmill shed, built over the river, one of its sides touching the main building, so that the stream from the four mill-wheels swept under it with a great rush of green water, making the shed above to vibrate.

But he had not yet rested properly, nor had a good breathing-space, when Matthew, who had dined with the miller, shouted as he came out:

"To work, men! To work!"

So, much against his will, and groaning over the shortness of his noonday rest, he was forced to pull himself together and once more take up what he had to do.

All were in lively movement and worked briskly; the frost

was so intense, and Matthew urged them with so much zeal.

The mill clattered unceasingly; beneath its wheels, all overgrown with icicles like a long greenish mane, the stream went rushing noisily on. The saws rasped away with continuous crackling harshness, as the sound of one biting glass to bits, and they spat the yellow sawdust forth. Matthew was everywhere, active and indefatigable, always shouting and urging the toilers to hurry up. He filled with whole place, nimble as a goldfinch pecking at hempseed; his short red-striped spencer, his grey sheepskin cap, were seen flying about over the trodden snow covered with chips, where they were getting the logs ready—ordering, scolding, laughing, joking, whistling, and working as hard as any; but for the most part on the platform close to the saws. For this sawing-shed had no side-walls, only a roof; so that its whole interior was visible from outside. It rose above the river on four stout piles, against which the current rushed with such force and fury that the roof, made of reeds and resting only on those piles, often trembled like a wisp of straw in a gale.

"A good craftsman he is, that fellow!" quoth Antek, with unwilling recognition.

"And well paid too!" Bartek growled in reply.

They beat their arms against their chests to keep off the increasing cold, and went on working silently.

Of workmen there were enough. Two were at the saws, rolling the sawn logs down to the yard and dragging up fresh ones; two more were cutting off the one end of each log that had been left untouched, and making the sawn planks into piles or carrying into a shed those too thin to bear the outside cold; and a couple of others were stripping the bark off oak and fir and pine logs. To these last, Bartek used often to shout in jest:

"Devil take you, how ye skin them! Ye'll be past-masters in dog-flaying, belike!"

But they objected to such jokes, for they never had anything to do with the dog-killer's craft.

All these men Matthew kept so hard at work that they

could only seldom and by stealth find means to run round to the mill, warm their freezing hands, and come back at a gallop, pressed hard by the work itself.

Twilight was nearly over when Antek crawled home, so weary and broken that every bone in him ached. After supper he went to bed at once and, falling asleep, slept as one dead.

Hanka had no heart to inquire about anything, but tried to make him as comfortable as she could, keeping the children quiet, asking her father to make no noise with his boots, and walking barefooted in the room herself; and when he prepared at daybreak to go to work, she boiled a pot of milk for him to take with potatoes for breakfast, that he might feed better and be warmed.

"Confound it!" he declared; "my bones ache so, I cannot move about."

Bylitsa remarked that this was only because he was not yet accustomed to, and that it would soon pass off.

"Of course it will pass off: I know that.—Hanka, will you bring me my dinner?"

"I will, I will: why should you come hither so far?"

He then started at once, the work being due to begin with the day.

Many a day of hard and weary toil followed.

Whether the frost baked the ground at the height of its fierceness, or the gusts and snow-charged gales were blowing, or a thaw came, and they were forced to stand the livelong day in the melting slush, while the bleak damp cold entered their very marrow, or the snow fell so that Antek could hardly see his ax—they had to work all day long till every vein and sinew of the body ached with weariness: the four saws devoured the timber so fast that the men were hardly equal to supplying them; and Matthew was driving them on besides.

But what exasperated him was not the work; for, as wise men say, "Whatever you take to well, can give comfort even in hell." No: what he could not bear was Matthew's position of superiority, and his continual sneers.

The others had got used to these; but he could not help boiling with indignation each time; and more than once he uttered so fierce a snarl that the overseer's eyes flamed. And then, of set purpose, he would begin to criticize everything about Antek: not openly to his face, but always animadverting on anything imperfect in his work, till the latter tingled all over and felt his fists clench of themselves. He nevertheless restrained himself, damped his fires, and simply put all these things by for future remembrance, being well aware that Matthew only awaited an opportunity to oust him from his place.

Now, though Antek cared little for his work in itself, he was resolved not to be put down and triumphed over by any man alive.

And the outcome of all this was that their mutual hatred grew deadlier every day: Yagna, like a festering wound, being at the bottom thereof. Ever since last spring, possibly since last Carnival, both had alternately followed her, each trying to get the better of the other, secretly indeed, yet well aware of the other's attempts. Matthew, however, worked in the open, telling everyone of his love, while Antek was compelled to hide his feelings, and let a dull, yet burning jealousy devour his heart.

There never had been much love lost between them, and they had always looked somewhat askance at each other, and would boast great things in the presence of third parties, each holding himself to be the strongest fellow in the whole village. And now that this mutual hate had grown to such an extent in a few weeks, it had came to pass that neither would address the other; they passed by, glaring like angry wolves.

Matthew was not a bad fellow, nor even of churlish disposition. On the contrary, he had a good heart, and an open helping hand. His only defects were too much self-confidence, and a tendency to set himself above others, together with a belief in his irresistibility with the other sex. No girl, he thought, but must give way to him; and he said so, and bragged of it, and was the first of men in his own con-

ceit. He now also enjoyed telling folk that Antek worked under his orders, and looked up to him humbly lest he should be expelled.

For those that knew the latter, it was surprising to mark how he kept himself calm, and stooped to behave so humbly as he did. But there were those who said there was something brewing under all this; that Antek had never yet overlooked an insult, and would one of these days take his revenge. These were even ready to bet that Matthew would soon find out that he was (as they say) biting at a very sour apple.

Antek, of course, who never looked in anywhere, was ignorant of all that was said. He used to pass by without speaking even to his acquaintances, always going straight home after working-hours. But he, too, felt that there was something about to happen, and he saw plainly through Matthew's doings.

"But I'll beat you into such a jelly, you carrion, that the very dogs will have none of you, and you'll never brag any more!" Such was the cry that escaped him one day at work. Bartek heard and said:

"Take no thought of him; he is paid to drive us, and he does." The old man had not caught the meaning of that cry.

"I cannot brook even a dog that barks without cause!"

"You take it all too much to heart; it heats your liver, and makes you, as I see, toil too feverishly."

"No, I work like that on account of the cold," he answered, wishing to make some reply or other.

"Let us do all things slowly, step by step. Slowly; for the Lord Jesus, who might have made the world in one day only, chose to do so in a whole week, with one day of rest. Why should you be so anxious to wear yourself out for the miller or anyone else's sake? Who forces you?—Matthew is a watch-dog, nothing more: why take his barking amiss?"

"I spoke as I felt," Antek said; and then, to change the conversation, "Where were you last summer?" he asked. "I did not see you in the village."

"I worked a little, saw something of this God's world,

looked about me, and filled my soul with spiritual food," he answered deliberately, whilst hewing the other side of Antek's log, now and then straightening himself, and stretching his limbs till the joints cracked: always pipe in mouth.

"I was working with Matthew at the new Manor; but he drove too hard, and it was springtime in the land, and the sunshine smelt sweet. So I left him. There were folk going that way down to Kalvarya;[1] so I went with them to gain the indulgences and see a bit of the country."

"Is it far to Kalvarya?"

"'Tis beyond Cracow.—But I did not get so far. In a village where we stopped to dine, there was a peasant building a hut, and he knew as much about building as a goat knows about pepper! He made me angry; I swore at the man, for he was wasting good timber—and in the end I stayed on with him. In a couple of months I had built him a house like a villa; and for that he would perforce have me wed his sister, a widow that had five acres of land hard by."

"Old, I dare say."

"Not young, 'tis true; but still comely enough. Rather bald, to be sure; lame, too, with a cast in her eye; and smooth of face to look upon, as a loaf nibbled by mice for a fortnight. But a pleasant woman, and a kind one; gave me lots of good things to eat—now scrambled eggs with bits of sausage, now vodka and lard, now other dainties. And she took to me so that I might have shared her cot any day, had I cared."

"Why did you not? Five acres are always worth having."

"Oh, I had no mind for any woman. Of petticoats I have long had more than enough. They are always crying out and screaming, like magpies in a hedge: you say one word, and they bang a score at your head, like a handful of peas. You have your reason to go by; they have only their

[1] A town close to which stands a monastery on a high hill, with the stations of the Way of the Cross, made in imitation of those in Jerusalem. After Chenstohova, this is the greatest place of pilgrimage in Poland.—*Translator's Note.*

tongues. You talk to them, thinking to be understood: and they neither understand nor heed you, but jabber foolishness only.—They say our Lord created woman with only half a soul. It must be so—and the devil has supplied them with the other half."

"Perhaps," Antek put in sadly, "some women may be intelligent."

"Some crows may be white, but none has ever seen any."

"Tell me: were you ever married?"

"I was! Oh, yes, I was!" He stopped short, straightened himself, and his grey eyes looked far, far away. He was an old man, dry as a wood-shaving, but sinewy: and straight too, save when at times he drooped, and the pipe wobbled about in his mouth, and his eyes, as now, blinked with quick flutterings.

"Time for the next log!" cried the man at the saws.

"Hurry now, Bartek! Don't dawdle there! The saws are stopping!" shouted Matthew.

"He's a fool—wants things done quicker than possible.

> "'There comes a rook to church;
> "A priest am I!" he screeches,
> And croaks from pulpit-perch,
> And fondly thinks he preaches,'"

Bartek grumbled, as in anger; but some other emotion had taken hold of him, and his rests were more frequent, and he sighed at times, looking southward for noon.

Luckily it came then: the women were there, with the dinners in the pots they carried. Hanka appeared from behind the mill. The saws ceased their rasping, and they all went to eat in the building, Antek, who knew the miller's man, going to his room. At present he did not avoid folk, nor turn away from them, but would look them in the face with eyes that made them turn their own away.

In a room too hot almost to breathe in, there sat several persons in sheepskins, talking joyously. These were people from villages at some distance, who had brought corn that was to be ground while they waited. They had crammed

with peat the little stove that was already red-hot, and were smoking cigarettes and chatting, so that the whole room was as dim as it was hot.

Antek seated himself on a sack near the window and, with the pot between his knees, he fell to with great zest, first upon the dish of cabbage with peas, and then upon another, made of potatoes mashed with milk. Hanka, crouching on the floor by his side, looked tenderly on him. Hard work had made him thinner, and in places the skin had peeled off his face: yet to her he seemed the handsomest man on earth. Yes, just as he was: tall, straight-limbed, lithe; slender-waisted, broad-shouldered, supple; his face a long thin oval, his nose like a hawk's beak, but only slightly curved; his eyes full, a greyish green, under eyebrows that seemed drawn with charcoal from temple to temple in one straight line, and were terrible to behold when he knit them in angry mood; his forehead lofty, but half covered with hair that fell over it, straight down, like a mane, dark almost to blackness; and that upper lip of his, clean-shaven after the peasants' fashion, disclosing a row of white teeth within crimson borders, like a string of ivory beads! Oh, she was never tired of gazing upon him!

"Could not your father bring the dinner? You have to go so far every day!"

"He had to remove the dung from our heifer's stall; and besides, I preferred to come myself."

And she always managed to do so, for the mere sake of gazing at his comely form.

"Any news?" he asked, as his dinner came to an end.

"Nothing much. I have spun one sack of wool, and taken the yarn—five hanks of it—to the organist's wife. She was very much pleased.—Our little Peter is not well: he won't eat and is hot and feverish."

"He has only overeaten himself."

"Surely, surely.—Oh, and Yankel came to buy our geese."

"Will you sell them?"

"A likely thing, indeed! To buy others when spring comes round?"

"Do as you choose. I leave all that to you."

"And at the Vahniks' there has been a fight again, and his Reverence has been sent for to reconcile them.—And they say that the calf at the Paches' has choked itself with eating carrots."

"That's all one to me," he growled impatiently.

"—And the organist came collecting sheaves," she said after a while, with a tremble in her voice.

"What did you give?"

"Two handfuls of carded flax, and four eggs.—And he said that, if we wished, he would let us have a wagonful of oat-straw, and wait till summer for payment. But I did not accept: why should we take aught from him? And moreover, we have a right to your father's pasturage. We had only two cartloads—far too few for so many acres . . ."

"I will not remind him of it, and I forbid you to do so. For the spinning you do, take the oat-straw from the organist. If you will not, then sell all our live-stock. So long as I live, never will I ask my father for anything whatsoever. —Do you understand?"

"I do, and shall apply to the organist."

"Your work, together with mine, will perhaps suffice.—Hanka, no weeping here: they see us!"

"I am not weeping.—Antek, pray ask the miller for half a hectolitre of barley to grind: if we bought it ready ground, it would cost more."

"Good. I will tell him to-day, and stay on here one of these evenings to see it ground."

Hanka left him, and he remained, smoking cigarettes in silence. They were just then talking of the Squire of Vola, and of his brother.

"His name is Yacek: I knew him well!" Bartek exclaimed, coming into the room.

"Then of course you know he has returned from foreign parts."

"No, indeed. I thought he had died long ago."

"He is here; arrived a fortnight back."

"Yes, he has come, but—so folk say—not quite in his

right mind. He refuses to live at the Manor, and has gone to dwell in the pine-forest, where he does everything for himself—cooking, sewing, and all. Everyone wonders at him. In the evening he plays on his violin: they often and often meet him on the roads near certain graves, where he sits and plays tunes."

"I was told he goes from hamlet to hamlet, asking people for news of one Kuba."

"Kuba?—Many a dog is named Tray!"

"He gives no surname, but seeks the man Kuba, who carried him off a battle-field, it seems, and saved his life once."

"There was a Kuba at our farm who went out with the nobles in the last insurrection; but he's dead," Antek observed, rising to his feet; for Matthew was already shouting outside:

"Come out, you: are ye to make dinner last till tea-time?"

Antek, much ruffled, rushed out, and cried:

"Do not spend breath in vain, we all can hear you!"

"He is too full of meat, and eases his belly with shouting!" was Bartek's remark; and someone added:

"The noise he makes is but to curry favour with the miller."

Matthew went on grumbling: "They must dine and enjoy long chats at their ease,—must they not?—these grand fellows, these big farmers, who haven't one whole pair of breeches!"

"Take that, Antek; that's for you!"

"Hold your peace, and let not your tongue clack so, or I'll cut it out for you!" Antek had raised his voice, ready now for anything. "And never a word more about farmers!"

Matthew darted a murderous look at him, but replied nothing. For the whole day, he mutely watched Antek's work with the most rigid scrutiny, but without finding anything against him. He worked so admirably well that the miller himself, who came round several times a day to look over the work done, could not find any fault with it, and

at the first weekly payment raised his wages to three *złoty*.

At this Matthew, in a towering passion, had words with the miller, who answered: "I am satisfied both with him and with you, and with every man who works well."

"You have raised his wages merely to spite me!"

"I have done so as in justice bound, and want all men to know I am just. Why, he is worth as much as Bartek, if not more."

"Then," Matthew threatened, "I throw the whole damned business up. You may do the work yourself!"

"Do so, if you choose. If my black bread is not to your taste, go seek rolls elsewhere. Young Boryna will take your place, and that at four *złoty* daily," the miller said, with a laugh.

Matthew cooled down immediately, seeing that bullying was out of the question. He gave up his persecutions, put his dislike for Antek deep into his pocket (though there it burned like a live coal), and also became less exacting, less of a taskmaster for the men. This they were not slow to perceive, and Bartek presently remarked to the others:

"He's like the dog that snapped at a man's boot, got kicked on the muzzle, and fawned on him. Aye, he thought he was the favourite, and knows now he will have to go as soon as a better man is found."

Both to the rise in wages, and to Matthew's knuckling down, Antek was indifferent; he cared for all that as much as for the year gone by. It was not for the money's sake, but to please Hanka, and for his own satisfaction, that he was working. Had he made up his mind to lie on his back all day long, he would have done so, no matter what came of it.

Thus day after day, week after week slipped by, till Yuletide, in hard incessant labour. Little by little, his mind grew calmer—frozen up, as it were: so far was he from resembling the man he had been. Folk marvelled at this, and judged him diversely. But the change in him was only external and for the eyes of men: within he remained as he was before. He worked now, and toiled hard, gave his

wife every *groschen* he earned, stayed at home of evenings, was kinder than ever, silent, peaceful; played with his children, helped his wife at home, nor ever said a cross word to anyone. But all this did not avail to hoodwink Hanka. His transformation pleased her, indeed, and she fervently thanked God for it, watching over him, attentive to the looks in his eyes to find out what he desired—the most attached and thoughtful of servants. But she would often note a mournful gleam in his eye, and overhear a low sigh that escaped him. Then her arms dropped to her sides, and her heart died within her as she sought in her mind, thinking whence the evil that was to come would proceed. Well did she know that something terrible was fermenting within him—something that he repressed only by putting forth his whole strength—something that crouched secretly, sucking, sucking the life-blood of his soul!

But whatever he felt, good or evil, he said nothing. After his work he returned straight home, choosing the longer way by the other side of the pond, that he might not pass near his father's home, not meet with . . . someone.

Someone!

Therefore, too, he stayed at home on Sundays, although Hanka besought him to come to church with her. He feared a meeting with Yagna; he felt that he should not stand it, that he never could resist.

Besides, he had heard from Bartek, with whom he was not on unfriendly terms, how the village folk were always busied about him; how they watched and spied upon him at every step, as on a thief. And he had himself more than once seen eyes that peeped at him round corners, with swift peering glances,—glances which would have loved to penetrate his very soul, to search all that was therein, and explore it through and through.

"The wretches! But they shall get nothing out of me, nothing!" he would say bitterly, all the more stubborn in his hate because he kept more aloof from everyone.

"I need no one; I am on such terms with myself that I can scarcely bear my own companionship," he would reply

to Klemba, when the latter reproached him for never coming to see them.

This was true, most true; he could hardly bear to live on thus, continually holding himself down with all his might, breaking his soul in as with an iron curb, and keeping it under the strictest control. But he felt himself giving way with sheer weariness of the struggle; ever more and more frequently there came over him the longing to throw everything up and yield to his fate—happy or miserable, it mattered little to him. He was disgusted with life, and devoured with sadness—infinite sadness, which, like a bird of prey, had sunk its talons deep into his mangled heart.

To bear the yoke thus was irksome beyond words: he choked and strained in bonds, as a horse tethered in a paddock, or as a chained-up dog might do.

He thought of himself as a fruit-tree, broken by the gales, condemned to die, withering slowly in the midst of a blossoming orchard full of lusty life.

And Lipka—Lipka went on as usual. There were christenings, as at the Vahniks'; betrothals, as at the Klembas' (though now they had no music, they took as much enjoyment as was allowed in Advent); then in some families there was a death, as at that other Bartek's, whom his son-in-law had beaten so fearfully that he pined away and lay moaning until at last refreshed in Abraham's bosom. And Yagustynka had once again brought another action against her children for breach of contract. Many another thing was going on besides, something new in nearly every hut, and folk had plenty of matter for gossip, and for laughter and for sorrow. And throughout the long winter evenings, the women gathered together and spun in many a cabin. And, Lord! how they all did laugh and chatter and wrangle, till the noise of their jollity was heard far out on the road! Everywhere there was no end of squabbling, of striking up friendships, of wooings, of trysts outside the homesteads; of turmoils and fightings and sweet converse: as in an anthill or in a beehive, so the folk swarmed and buzzed within their cabins.

Yes, everyone lived as he pleased, as seemed best to him and was fitter both to himself and his neighbours, and according to the commandments of God.

And he, Antek, stood alone, outside of them all, cut off from humanity; like a strange bird, hungry, yet afraid, that will perhaps flap its wings outside the lighted windows, and long to draw nearer to the corn-filled stacks—and yet does not: only wheels around, listens, feeds on its hunger, gulps down its thirst, and never will draw nigh!

Unless—unless God should deign to work in him a change that might last for ever, and make him a new creature!

Alas! of such a change he dreaded as yet even to think.

One morning, only a few days before Christmas, he met the blacksmith; who, though Antek would have passed him by, blocked the way and, stretching out his hand, said to him kindly and in a slightly sad tone:

"And I expected you'd come to me as to a brother. I could have talked with you and aided you, little as we have at home."

"Why did you not come first?"

"What? intrude and be driven away like Yuzka?"

"You were right. 'He that suffereth naught will for nothing take thought.'"

"'Suffereth naught!' Is not my grievance the very same as yours?"

"How dare you tell me such a bare-faced lie? Am I a witling in your eyes?"

"As I love the Lord God, I have spoken naught but the truth."

"'The fox, it is a cunning beast:
'Twill run and sniff and turn and twist,
And with its tail
It sweeps its trail,
That none may nose the scent of it,'"

said Antek, with contempt.

"Your grievance is, I know, that I went to the wedding. It is true that I did not refuse. But how could I? The

priest himself urged and pressed me not to offend God, making division between the children and their father."

"Ah, ye went at the priest's bidding, did ye? Tell that to him that will believe you, not to me.—Oh, but ye wring out of the old man all ye can wring, as the price of your friendship: he does not send you away empty-handed!"

"'Who takes not what is offered him's an ass,'" the blacksmith quoted. "But I'll not argue that with you. All Lipka will tell you—why, you may ask Yagustynka, who is always with the old man—that I press him to make it up with you. It will come about . . . he will calm down . . . and we shall arrange matters."

"Try to reconcile dogs, not him and me: do you hear? I never thought of quarrelling with you; but now, let me alone, you and your reconciliations!—Look at him! A fine friend indeed! Never would you reconcile us, unless to get the last coat off my back!—Once for all, I tell you: let me alone, and do not come in my way; for if I ever fall into a passion, I'll tear your red hair off your scalp, and play the devil with your ribs: aye, and your good friends, the gendarmes, will not prevent me. Just remember that."

He turned on his heel and went off, not even looking round at the smith, who stood with mouth wide open in the middle of the road.

"The rotten liar!—Hand in glove with the old man, to come and talk to me of friendship! He that would make beggars of both of us, if he could!"

It took him some time to cool down after this meeting; especially as everything that morning went wrong with him. He had scarcely begun chopping the logs, when a knot made a notch in his ax; then, just before noon, a piece of timber crashed upon his foot, and only failed to crush it by a rare good chance: he had to pull his boot off and cool his swollen foot with ice. Matthew was, moreover, in bad humour that day, finding fault with everybody: this was badly done, that done too slowly; and, as for Antek, he took every pretext to grumble at him.

Everything went wrong; even the barley that Franek was

to have ground, and about which Hanka was always troubling, had not been done yet, the excuse being press of work.

At home, too, things were not quite right. Hanka was distressed and tearful, for little Peter lay sick of a burning fever, and she had been forced to call in Yagustynka to fumigate him.

She came just at supper-time, sat by the fire, looked furtively about her, and would have liked to gossip very much, but that they received her attempts very coldly; and so she presently set to trying her healing powers on the boy.

"I am off to the mill," Antek said, taking his cap; "unless I see the barley ground myself, it never will be done."

"Could not Father go in your stead?"

"I shall be far more likely to get it."—He went off in a hurry, ill-humoured, out of sorts, tossed about like a solitary tree in a storm. Besides, everything at home enraged him—especially those prying ferret eyes of Yagustynka.

The evening was still and not frosty, with but few stars to be seen—only one or two, twinkling far away as through a veil. The wind blew from the woods, with a dull humming murmur, betokening a change of weather. Dogs barked dispersedly about the hamlet, smoke trailed along the road, and the air, though bleak, was damp.

Christmas being at hand, there were plenty of people at the mill. Those whose corn was being ground waited in the passage; the others stayed in the room of the miller's man. These formed a circle round Matthew, who was telling them something very funny, at which they every now and then burst into laughter. Antek did not care to cross the threshold, and went out to look for Franek at the mill.

"He is on the dam," they said, "squabbling with Magda—you know—the wench the organist turned out."

"The miller," another peasant told him, "has threatened to send him away, if he is ever again seen in the mill with Magda; for she used to spend her nights there. But, poor thing! where else has she to go?"

And someone else added, jestingly: "'What in March we pursue, in November we rue!'"

Antek sat down to wait, close to the place where the finest flour was ground, and opposite to the half-open door of the waiting-room. There he could discern Matthew's shoulders, and the heads of the others all turned towards him and intent on what he was telling them. But for the clatter of the wheels, he could have even made out what was said, though he had no curiosity that way.

He threw himself on to some sacks of corn, and presently, out of sheer dejection and weariness, began to doze.

The mill clattered away, flapping, throbbing, and in full activity in every one of its compartments; the wheels beat as if a hundred washerwomen were all using their bats with might and main; the water swirled past them with a bubbling hullabaloo and, churned up into boiling foam and snowy flakes, rushed on to the river.

For hard upon an hour, Antek stayed there, expectant, but at last made for the yard to go and seek Franek and also to rouse himself up somewhat, feeling overcome with slumber. The way out led through the waiting-room, which he was just going to enter, and his hand was upon the latch, when what he heard Matthew saying made him stop on a sudden.

"Yes, the old fellow boils the milk and tea, and takes it to her in bed! They say that he, along with Yagustynka, does all the kine want done for them, and will not let her soil her hands; nay, that he has bought something for her in town, lest she catch cold by going out behind the barn!"

Here followed a burst of loud laughter, and then a hail-storm of jests. Antek, by an instinctive movement, returned to where he had sat before and, flinging himself again upon the sacks, gazed vacantly at the streak of ruddy light that came from the door which stood ajar. Now he could hear no more, for the din made the talk inaudible; a grey mist of flour-dust rose and dimmed everything round him; the lamps, which hung by cords from the ceiling, twinkled through the white fog, and glowed athwart it, as yellow as cats' eyes, and vibrated continually. But he was too rest-

less to stay seated; again he rose, and quietly and on tiptoe approached the door, and bent his ear.

". . . She explained everything!" Matthew said. "Dominikova assured him that the girl had been in a hurry, scrambling over a fence . . . it was a thing that very frequently happened . . . had occurred to herself when a maiden. A most convenient explanation! And he believed her, the old ram! Such a clever man! and he believed her."

The laughter became a hurricane; they all were in paroxysms, and made the house ring again.

Nearer and nearer crept Antek, now almost on the very threshold, pale as a corpse, with fists clenched, crouching and gathered together for a spring.

When they had done, Matthew continued: "But as to what they say of Antek's being on too friendly terms with Yagna, I happen to know that to be false. I myself heard him whining like a dog outside her bedroom door, till she drove him out with a besom! He stuck to her like a burr to a dog's tail, but she got rid of him for all that."

Someone here inquired: "Did you see that? In the village they talk otherwise."

"Did I see?—Why, I was in there with her, and she herself complained how he teased her!"

"You lying cur!" Antek shrieked, as he darted past the threshold.

Matthew instantly sprang at him. But, swift as thought, Antek was upon him with the leap of a wolf. One hand clutching at his throat, stopping both breath and voice, the other grasping his belt, he whirled him up in the air like a bush you root out, burst open the door with a kick, and rushed with him beyond the sawmill to the river-fence, against which he hurled him with such fury that four rails broke like reeds, and Matthew fell into the stream like a log!

A great tumult and clamour ensued, for in that spot the river was deep and swift. They hastened to the rescue and got him out at once, but he was insensible. The miller

came running in directly and sent for Ambrose, who came in at once. The people from the village assembled in crowds, till Matthew was conveyed into the miller's house; he swooned again and again, and spat much blood. And as they feared he could not live through the night, the priest was sent for.

Antek, as soon as Matthew had been carried out, coolly took his place by the fireside, chatting with Franek, who had turned up; and when the folk were back in the room again, and things a little more quiet, Antek spoke out, so loud that all could hear him:

"If anyone shall a second time bait and mock me, I will do the like to him, yea, and more also!"

No one answered a word. They only gazed upon him in profound wonder and respect. How had it been possible to lay hold on such a man as Matthew, lift him up as easily as a bundle of straw, carry him out and hurl him into the river? So stupendous a feat had never yet been heard of. They might have fought together, wrestled, and one in the end have overcome the other, with breaking of bones even, or the crushing out of life: that was quite a usual thing. But no: he had taken the man, just as you take a puppy by the ears, and thrown him into the river! That the rails had broken his ribs, that was nothing; he might get well. But the shame of it, the shame, was what Matthew would never be able to bear: he was disgraced for all his life.

"Really, really, my dear fellow," one man repeated to another, "never yet has such a thing been!"

Heedless of their talk, Antek got his meal ground and went home about midnight. He saw the lighted window of the room at the miller's where they had taken Matthew.

"Foul dog!" he said as he glanced that way, and spat on the ground in hatred, "ye never will boast again of having been with Yagna in her bedchamber!"

Hanka had not yet gone to bed, and was spinning when he came in; but he told her nothing. In the morning he stopped away from work, feeling sure they had turned him

away. But he had scarcely breakfasted when the miller came in.

"Come and work. Your quarrel with Matthew is your own business: I have naught to do with it. But the saw-mill must go on working as before, till he is well.—You will now be overseer, and have four *złoty* a day and dinner."

"I do not accept. Give me what you gave Matthew, then I will: and do his work as well as he."

The miller flew in a rage, and wanted to bargain, but he was obliged to give in: what else could he do? He took him on at once, and walked away.

Hanka, who had been told nothing of what had occurred, was much puzzled at all this.

CHAPTER IV

SINCE daybreak on Christmas Eve, the whole village was in a state of feverish excitement and bustling activity.

It had again frozen during the night, and as the frost came after a couple of mild days and damp fogs, the trees were all covered over with a moss-like growth of glassy crystals. The sun had come out of the clouds, and shone in a clear blue sky, with only the thinnest and most transparent veil of haze; but it shone palely, coldly, like the Host in the Monstrance, warming nothing. The frost had grown harder as the day advanced, and of such severity and penetration that it almost took the breath away, and raised a cloud of condensed vapour round every living being. Yet the world was steeped in bright sunshine, and radiant with glittering splendour; on every side the sparkling snow seemed oversprinkled with a dew of diamond-like scintillation. The surrounding fields, buried under their white pall, lay refulgent, but dead. Now and then a bird passed, flapping over their pure expanse, while its black shadow glided along the ground below; or a covey of partridges clucked amongst the snow-laden bushes, with timorous watchfulness and stealth, drawing near to the dwellings of men and their cornstacks crammed with grain. Elsewhere a hare would show its dark form, leaping through the drifts, or standing on its hind legs, or gnawing to get at the garnered corn, but—alarmed by the barking of the dogs, —scamper back to the great forest, where every tree was tufted with hoar-frost.

A keen piercing cold, luminous with glacial sheen, now shimmered over the whole world, and plunged it in ice-bound stillness.

Not a single cry broke the hard silence of the country-side, no living voice resounded, no breath of wind whispered amongst those glistening arid fields of snow. Only at rare intervals, from the roads half buried in the drifts, did faint-voiced bells and the stridulous creaking of a sledge strike the ear, so feeble and so far off that they were all but inaudible, and no one could tell whence it came or whither it went, ere the sound again faded into utter silence.

But all along the Lipka roads, on either side of the pond, the folk were noisy and swarming. The air itself wafted something of festive joy, and the people, nay, even the cattle, were full of the same. Through the frozen air that carried sound so well, there floated cries like musical tunes; laughter out of many a merry throat echoed from one end of the hamlet to the other, awakening like gaiety of heart; dogs rolled madly about on the snow, and bayed with glee, and pursued the crows that hung about the cabins; horses whinnied in unseen stalls; and cows in their byres bellowed tunefully. One might almost fancy that the snow crackled more crisply and briskly underfoot, while the sledge-runners sounded sharp along the hardened and glass-smooth roads, and the smoke went up in blue pillars straight as arrows, and the cabin-windows winked in the sun till they fairly dazzled you. Noisy children were all about, and the hum of talk was heard, and the cackling of geese that swam about in the holes made in the ice; and people were calling, calling to one another. On the roads, round about the homesteads and their belongings, folk were passing everywhere; and through the snow-whitened orchards gleamed the red petticoats of women going from hut to hut and, as they went and grazed the trees or shrubs, receiving a shower of silvery dust.

On this day, even the mill did not clatter. Indeed, it was silent during the whole festival; but a pellucid ice-cold stream, led out by the sluices, ran with babbling melody; and beyond this, somewhere far away, the cries of a flock of wild ducks, wheeling in the air, arose from marshes and moors.

Every cabin—Machek's, Simon's, the Voyt's, and who can

say how many more?—was now being aired and scoured and scrubbed, and the rooms, the passages, and even the snow in front of the huts, were strewn with fresh pine-needles; in some dwellings the hearths, grown black and dingy, had also been whitewashed. In all the huts they were busy making bread, especially the *strucle*, or wheaten bread, with poppy-seed-sprinkled crust; and this seed was also being pounded in mortars for other much-liked dainties.

Yes, Yule-tide was at hand: the feast of the Divine Child, the joyful day of wondrous goodwill to men; the blessed respite from the long never-ending round of labour, to arouse the souls of men from their wintry torpor, and shake off the grey dullness of everyday life, and make them go forward joyfully and with a glad thrill of the heart, to meet the day of our Lord's Nativity.

At Boryna's, too, the same activity, and quick going to and fro, and bustling preparation, prevailed as elsewhere.

Boryna himself had been in town since the morning, to make purchases. Pete, a man whom he had taken as groom after Kuba's death, accompanied him.

They all were very busy inside the cabin. Yuzka, humming a tune, was cutting out of coloured paper some of those curious figures which they stick for decoration either on the beams or on the picture-frames, making them look as if painted in brilliant colours. Yagna, her sleeves turned up almost to her shoulders, was kneading in the trough with her mother's aid; now preparing the long *strucle*, and loaves of the finest flour (she was hurrying, for the dough had already risen, and she had to fashion the loaves instantly); now casting an eye on Yuzka's work; now seeing to the honey-and-cheese-cakes, that were rising under warm coverings, and awaiting their turn for the baking-oven; and now flying round to where the fire roared up the chimney.

Vitek had been ordered to see to the fire and keep it well fed with logs; but they had seen him only at breakfast: afterwards, where was he?—Both Yagna and Dominikova looked for him about the premises, and called him, but in vain; he never answered. The naughty lad was away be-

yond the haystack, out in the fields, under the bushes where he was setting snares to catch partridges, and covering these over with thick layers of chaff, both to conceal them, and as a bait. Lapa accompanied him, and also Bociek, the stork that he had taken care of, and healed, and fed, and taught a number of tricks, and made such a friend of that he had only to whistle in a peculiar manner for it to come to him as obediently as Lapa—with whom, besides, it got on in perfect harmony, and they used to hunt rats together in the stable.

Roch, whom Boryna had taken to his home for the holidays, had been and was still in church, where, in company with Ambrose, he had spent the morning decorating the altar and the walls with pine-branches that the priest's servant brought to them.

It was near noon when Yagna had finished kneading all the loaves, and was now placing them on a board, patting them into shape, and daubing them over with white of egg, lest they should crack in the oven. Just then Vitek came in, crying out: "They are bringing us the Kolendy!"

Since early dawn, Yanek, the organist's eldest son—the one who was at school—had been taking altar-breads round, in company with his younger brother.

When they came in, and said: "Praised be Jesus Christ!" Yagna turned and saw them.

She was greatly confused at the room being in such disorder and, hiding her bare arms beneath her apron, asked them to sit down and rest, as they had heavy baskets, and the younger one bore several packages besides.

They said they could not. "We have still to go over half the village, and but little time for that."

"At least stay awhile, Mr. Yanek, and warm yourself: it is so bitterly cold!"

"And," Dominikova proposed, "perhaps you will both take a little hot milk."

They made excuses, but at last rested themselves close to the window. Yanek was unable to take his eyes off Yagna, till she hurriedly pulled her sleeves down over her arms:

at which he turned crimson like a beet-root, and fumbled in his basket for the altar-breads. He took out the finest and largest packet, in a gilt paper wrapper, and containing several coloured wafers, also shaped like altar-breads. Yagna, holding her hands under her apron, took the packet, laid it on a plate beneath the crucifix, and then brought him a good gallon measure of linseed, and six eggs.

"Have you been back here long, Mr. Yanek?"

"Only three days: since Sunday."

"Is not that book-learning a very tedious thing?" Dominikova inquired.

"Not very; but then it is only to last till spring."

"Your mother told me—I remember 'twas on my wedding-day—you were going to prepare for the priesthood."

"Yes, I—I am.—After Eastertide," he answered, in a low tone and with downcast eyes.

"Lord, what a consolation that will be to your parents! To have a priest in the family! And what an honour to the parish!"

"Have you any news?"

"None; and that is good news. Everything goes on quietly with us, as is usual amongst farmers."

"Yagna, I should willingly have come over for your wedding, but they would not let me."

"Oh," Yuzka exclaimed, "what a merry-making that was! Why, there was dancing for three days running!"

"Kuba died then, I am told."

"Yes, he did, poor wretch! Lost so much blood, he passed away before the priest came to shrive him. They say in the village that his soul is doing penance—that there is now some creature wandering about and groaning by night along the ways and where four roads meet, and hard by crosses, waiting for God to have mercy on it. It must be Kuba's soul: whose else?"

"What is this you say?"

"Naught but the truth. I myself have seen nothing, and so cannot swear to it. But there may be things in the world that man's mind is unable to see through, no matter

how keen. For these are the works of God, not of man."

"I am sorry Kuba died. The priest himself wept when he told me."

"A most upright servant he was: quiet, religious, hard-working, never taking what was not his, and always ready to share his last garment with a poor man."

"Continual changes in Lipka. Every time I come back here, I find things quite altered.—I was at Antek's to-day. His children are ill, misery is knocking at their door, and he himself is so changed, so thin, I hardly knew him."

To these words there was no answer. Yagna quickly turned her face away, and set about putting the loaves on the shovel, whilst her mother darted him such a glance that he felt he had touched on an upleasant subject. With a wish to mend matters, he was seeking to start another, when Yuzka addressed him with a blush, and asked for some of his coloured wafers.

"I want them for the 'globes' we hang up. We had some from last year, but they were quite spoiled in the racket of the wedding-feast."

Certainly he would; and he gave her more than a dozen, of five different tints.

"So many! O Lord! I shall have enough to make not only 'globes,' but 'moons' too, and 'stars'!" she cried in great glee. Yagna whispered to her, and she came, blushing, her apron over her face, to offer him six more eggs in return for his gift.

Boryna had meanwhile returned, and came in, Lapa and Bociek following him, along with Vitek.

"Shut the door this instant," cried Dominikova, "or the cakes will get cold!"

"When women set to putting things in order," Boryna said jocosely, as he warmed his freezing hands, "men must seek lodgings, even at the tavern. The road was like glass, the sledge ran splendidly, but it was so cold we were nearly frozen in our seats.—Yagna, give Pete something to eat. He has been nigh freezing to the marrow in his soldier's greatcoat.—Tell me, Yanek, are you home for long?"

"Till Twelfth Night."

"You must be a great help to your father, both at the organ and in his office. It is so cold, he can hardly wish to leave his warm bed, now that he is getting on in years!"

"But that's not why he did not come to you himself: our cow has calved to-day, and he is forced to stay and tend her."

"That's good for you: you will have milk all the winter through."

"How now, Vitek, have you watered the colt?"

"I have myself," said Yagna, "but it would not drink at all, only frisked about; and it teased the mare so, I had to take it away to the biggest stall."

Yanek and his brother took their leave, but the former had his eyes fixed on Yagna to the very last: he saw she was still more lovely than in autumn, when yet unmarried.

It was therefore no wonder that she had so completely overcome her old husband, who could see nothing in the world but her. They said truly in the village that his love had made a dotard of him. Hard and unyielding as he was to everyone else, Yagna could do with him whatever she pleased; he obeyed her in everything, saw things only through her eyes, and took her advice, and her mother's too. Nor had he any reason to regret the results. His farm was in good order, everything prospered, he had every comfort, someone to complain to and talk things over with; and his only care in the world was now Yagna, to whom he cast up his eyes as to some holy image.

Even now, whilst warming himself by the fire, he looked lovingly in her direction, and had ready, just as before the wedding, sweet affectionate words for her; all his thoughts were to give her pleasure.

Yagna, indeed, cared as much for his love as for last year's snow. Just now she was moody, and out of patience with his transports of tenderness. Everything harried her, and she went about, angry and cold as a February wind, throwing work on her mother, or on Yuzka, and spurring her husband himself to exertions by some sharp word: she

herself went to the other lodgings, she said, to see about the stove, and to the stable to tend the colt; but, in reality, to be alone and think of Antek.

For Yanek had reminded her of him, and now Antek was as present to her mind's eye as if he were there before her in the flesh. During hard upon three months she had seen nothing of him—except that once, when she was driving out along the Poplar-road. Yes, time had flowed by like a river: the wedding, the home-coming, her various occupations and the cares of her household duties, had left her no time to think of him. Out of sight, out of mind; and her acquaintances had avoided all mention of his name. And now, she knew not why, he had surged up suddenly before her with so sad and reproachful a look that her very soul within her was shaken and distressed.—"I have done no harm to you," she said within herself; "why, then, are you haunting me thus, like a spectre, like a ghost?" And she attempted to wrestle with her memories of the past. She marvelled why his figure alone came back to her so—not Matthew's, not Staho Ploshka's, not any of the others—only his! Had he given her a love-charm that was now putting her beside herself, and tormenting her with the pangs that she felt?

"What is he doing now, poor fellow? what is he thinking of? . . . And there is no means of having speech with him, none!—Certainly, it is a grievous sin.—Dear Jesus! It is a thing forbidden; so the priest told me in confession.—Oh, but if I could only speak to him once more—speak even in presence of a third person!—No, no: never, never, never! . . . I am Boryna's until death!"

"Yagna!" her mother called; "do come: we have to take the loaves out."

She ran back to the house, hurrying and bustling, and seeking to forget. But in vain: everywhere she saw his eyes, and those black overshadowing brows of his—and those red, red lips . . . how ravenously eager, and how sweet!

She set to work with feverish activity, putting the place in order; and in the evening she went to the byre, a place she

scarcely ever visited. But all would not do. He was always there—there before her.—A great craving arose within her, tearing her heart to shreds; and her soul was so sorely tempest-tossed that she at last came to Yuzka, sedulously at work making "globes," and, sitting down upon the chest by her side, burst into a passion of tears.

Her mother and her husband were alarmed and sought to calm her; they tried to soothe her as one soothes a spoiled child; they caressed her, they looked lovingly into her eyes: all was of no avail. She cried till she could cry no longer. And then, suddenly, she felt a change and, rising from her seat in a strange humour of merriment, began to talk and laugh, and almost burst into song.

Boryna stared at her in wonder, and so did her mother. Then they exchanged glances full of meaning, and went out to whisper together in the passage. They came back gay and joyful, and embraced and kissed her with the most tender affection.

"Do not lift that kneading-trough!" exclaimed Dominikova earnestly; "you must not. Matthias will do that for you!"

"Why, I have often lifted and carried many a heavier thing!"

She did not understand.

Boryna would not let her touch the trough; he carried it himself. And a little later, when she was in the bedroom, he took the opportunity of taking her in his arms and telling her something that Yuzka was not to hear.

"Both mother's head and yours are turned! What you suppose is not the case: you are both wrong."

"These are things that we know something about, and there is no mistake here.—Let me see. It is Yule-tide now. . . . Then—then it will be only in July.—Dear, dear! in harvest-time!—Yet let us thank God that it has come to pass in any case." He would have embraced her again, but she shrank away from him in a temper, and ran to her mother to protest. The old dame, however, asserted that there was no mistake.

"There is, there is! 'tis naught but your fancy!" Yagna cried in hot denial.

"You are not glad of this, it seems?"

"And why should I be glad? Have we not enough troubles, without this too thrown in?"

"Do not complain, or the Lord will punish you!"

"Let Him, let Him!"

"But what have you to complain of?"

"That I do not wish it: that is all!"

"Look, Yagna: if you have a child, then, in the case of your husband's death (which Heaven forfend!) it would have an equal part with the other children as his heir; and possibly all the land might come to it in the end . . ."

"Land, land, land! Ye think of naught else; and to me it is naught!"

"Because you're as yet a silly child, and your head is full of nonsense. A man without land is like a man without legs: he crawls about and cannot get anywhere.—But, at any rate, say nothing of this to Matthias; it would vex him."

"I shall say whatever I like. What do I care for him?"

"Then do so, if you are such a fool; yes, tell everybody about it!—Go rather, set to work; take the herrings out of the water to soak them in milk; it will make them less salt. And tell Yuzka to pound some more poppy-seed; there is yet much work, and the day is far spent."

So it was. Evening approached, the sun had sunk behind the forest; its setting glow stretched along the sky in blood-red streaks, and all the snows were fiery and as if over-sprinkled with live coals. The hamlet had quieted down. Folk were still fetching water from the pond, and chopping firewood; at times sledges went past like a whirlwind, men ran across the pond, gates creaked on their hinges, and voices were heard here and there; but the movement was slowing down as the fires of sunset died out: with the pallid livid hues now overspreading the plain, the quiet also spread, the land sank to rest, and the ways had fewer and fewer passers-by. The far-off fields now lost in murky darkness, the winter evening reigned over the country; the

cold increased, the snow crackled louder underfoot, and all the panes were embellished with frost-patterns and fantastic traceries.

Slowly the village was vanishing in grey snowy shadows, melting away; neither huts nor fences nor orchards could be made out; only a few lights twinkled, more thick than usual, because everyone was busy preparing the meal of Christmas Eve.

In every cabin, from the richest to the very poorest of all, preparations were being zealously made; in each family room, at the corner next the east, they had placed a sheaf of corn; the tables were strewn with hay beneath bleached linen napery; and they looked out eagerly through the windows for the appearance of the first star.

The sky, as is often the case when it freezes, was not very clear when evening began to fall; it had seemed to veil itself as soon as the last glow had burned out, and was hidden in the gloom of many a dusky wreath.

Yuzka and Vitek, terribly chilled, were standing outside the porch, on the watch for the appearance of the first star.

"There it is!" Vitek suddenly exclaimed. "There it is!"

Boryna and the others, and Roch last of them all, came out to see.

Yes, it was there, and just in the east, having pierced through the sombre curtains which hung round about it: it shone forth from the dark-blue depths, and seemed to grow larger as they gazed upon it; gleaming brighter and brighter, nearer and nearer, till Roch knelt down in the snow, and the others after him.

"Lo, 'tis the star of the Three Wise Men," he said; "the Star of Bethlehem, in whose gleaming our Lord was born.—Blessed be His Holy Name!"

These words they piously repeated after him, gazing up with eager eyes at the bright far-off witness of the miraculous Birth—the visible token of God's mercy, visiting the world.

Their hearts throbbed with tender gratitude and glowing faith, while they received and absorbed into their hearts

that pure light, the sacred fire—the sacrament to fight with and to overcome all evil!

And the star, seeming to grow larger still, rose up like a ball of fire, from which beams of azure brightness shot down like the spokes of a mystic wheel, darting its rays upon the snows, and twinkling with radiant victory over darkness. Then after it there came forth other stars, its faithful attendants, peering out in innumerably dense multitudes—filling all the heavens, covering them with a dew of light, and making them, as it were, a mantle of dark azure, strewn with silver motes.

"And now that the Word is made Flesh," said Roch, "it is time to take our meal."

They went in, and took seats for supper at a high long bench.

Boryna occupied the first place, then Dominikova and her sons (for they had arranged to eat together); Roch sat in the middle, Pete, Vitek, and Yuzka after him, and Yagna at the very end; for she had to see about the service.

The family room was now in utter and solemn silence.

Boryna, having made the sign of the Cross, divided an altar-bread with each of those present, and all partook of it with reverence, as representing the Bread of Life.

"Christ," then said Roch, "was born at this hour; therefore let every creature feed upon this holy bread!"

And though they had eaten all day long only a little dry bread, and were very hungry, they all ate slowly and with due decorum.

The first dish consisted of sour beet-root soup, with mushrooms and potatoes in it. After this came herrings, rolled in flour and fried in oil. Then there was a dish of cabbage and mushrooms, also seasoned with oil. And, to crown the feast, Yagna had prepared a most dainty dish—buckwheat meal, mixed with honey and fried in oil of poppy-seed! With all these dishes, they ate common dry bread: it was not becoming, on such a great fast-day, to eat either cakes or *struclе*, these containing butter or milk.

They ate for a considerable time, and there was but

little conversation; only spoons clattered and lips were smacked. Boryna wanted to get up and help Yagna, but her mother would not have it.

"Let her be," she said; "it will do her no harm. 'Tis the first Yule-tide at which she presides; she must learn and accustom herself."

Lapa, whimpering at times, was poking its head against thighs and knees, fawning and wagging its tail, in hope of getting sooner fed. Bociek the stork, whose place was in the passage, ever and anon pecked at the wall, or uttered its *klek-klek-klek,* to which the hens at roost responded.

The meal was not over yet, when someone tapped at the window.

Dominikova cried out: "Let no one in, no, nor even look that way! It is the Evil One: he will enter, and then stay here all the year round!"

The spoons dropped, and they listened in dismay, as the tapping was repeated.

"It is Kuba's soul!" Yuzka whispered.

"Say no foolish things: someone in need is there. On this day, none should suffer hunger, or be without a roof over him." So saying, Roch got up and opened the door.

It was Yagustynka, standing humbly on the threshold, who wept abundantly, and begged to be let in.

"Oh, give me but a corner, and what you leave your dog! Have pity on a poor old woman! . . . I was waiting for my children to ask me; I waited in vain, starved with cold in my hut. . . . O Lord! I am now a beggar-woman; and they leave me here, forlorn, without a morsel of bread—worse off than a dog! . . . And their cabin is full of people and of noise. I crept thither, looked round the corner and in at the window. . . . It was all of no use."

"Well, sit ye down with us. Better had it been to come when evening fell, and not expect favours from your children.—They will rejoice when they drive a last nail into your coffin, to make sure you will not come back to them." Thus Boryna spoke, and very kindly made a place for her by his side.

But she was unable to eat anything, however heartily Yagna, the least stingy of housewives, pressed her to take some food. It was impossible; she sat drooping, bent, crouching, taciturn, her trembling body showing how much she suffered.

The place was now cosy and quiet, pervaded by an atmosphere of kindliness and of solemn piety, as if the Holy Child were lying in the midst of them.

A huge fire, continually supplied with fresh fuel, was droning up the chimney, lighting the whole apartment; against its blaze the glazed images shone dazzlingly, the panes loomed black in the night. And now they seated themselves in front of the fire, on the long bench, and talked together in hushed and serious tones.

Presently Yagna made coffee, with plenty of sugar in it, which they sipped at leisure.

After a pause, Roch took out a book, round which he had wound his rosary, and began to read to them in a low voice that was full of deep emotion:

"Lo, a new thing hath come to pass to-day: a Virgin hath brought forth a Son: our Lord hath in the town of Bethlehem, not least of Judah's cities, entered this our world in poverty, within a wretched byre, on hay, amongst the cattle, which were all His brethren on this night. And that same star, which now is gleaming, gleamed upon the Child, showing the way unto the Three Wise Men: who, albeit black and heathens, yet were kind of heart, and came from far-off lands, across wide rolling seas with gifts; and thus bore witness to the Truth. . . ."

He continued reading a long time and his voice took the intonations of a prayer, almost of a chant or the singing of some holy litany. They listened to him in pious stillness, their souls silent and attentive, their hearts thrilling under the fascination of the miraculous, with the sincerest gratitude to God for the favours conferred upon them.

"Ah, sweet Jesus! Didst Thou then deign to be born in a stable, in that far-off country, amongst filthy Jews and cruel heretics—and in such poverty—and in such wintry

frost! O poor, poor Holy One, O sweet Child!"—Such were their thoughts, and their bosoms throbbed with pity, and their souls flew away like birds, over land and sea, to the place of the Nativity, to the Manger and the Crib over which the Angels sang—and to the Sacred Feet of the Child Jesus. There they fell, with all the might of their fiery faith and trust in Him; and they surrendered themselves to Him—His faithful servants for ever and ever. Amen!

As Roch went on reading, Yuzka, who was a good, kind, impressionable girl, fell to weeping copiously over our Lord's unhappy lot. Yagna, too, wept with her face in her hands and her head hidden behind Andrew, who was listening close by, with mouth wide open, and so greatly struck by what he heard, that he repeatedly pulled Simon by his sleeve, saying: "Lo! do you hear that, Simon?"

When it was over, some remarks were dropped:

"Poor Child! not even a cradle!"

"I marvel that He did not freeze."

"And that our Lord was willing to bear so much pain."

"Because," Roch answered, "it was only by His sufferings and sacrifice that He could save His people: which had He not done, Satan would assuredly have been master of the world and lord of every soul."

"Of this and these he is pretty much master and lord as it is," Yagustynka muttered.

"Sin is master, wickedness lord; and these are the helpers of Satan."

"Ah, well, whosoever it may be, one thing is sure: an ill fate has power over man."

"Speak not thus, lest ye sin: ye are blinded by wrath against your children."

The rebuke was stern, and she did not dispute its justice. The others also were silent, and Simon rose to withdraw; but his mother, attentive to everything, noticed him.

"Wither away so fast?" she hissed.

"Out—I feel too hot in here," he faltered, taken aback.

"Going to Nastka—to divert yourself, hey?"

"Would ye forbid, or hold me back?" he growled, but threw his cap back on to the chest where it had been.

"Return with Andrew to our hut: we have left the place to the care of Providence. See to the kine, and stay there for me; when I have rejoined you, we shall all go together to church." These were her orders; but as the lads were slow to obey, she did not repeat them; rising at once, she took an altar-bread from the table.

"Vitek, light the lantern; we are going to the kine. In this Yule-tide night, all the animals understand what men say, because our Lord was born in their midst. And whosoever shall, being without sin, speak unto them then, him will they answer with a human voice: this day they are the equals of man, and they are our fellows. And therefore we shall go and share the altar-bread with them."

All made for the byre, Vitek leading, lantern in hand.

The cows were lying in a row, leisurely chewing the cud; but the approach of the lantern and the voices caused them to snort and scramble heavily to their feet, turning their great heads away from the light.

"You, Yagna, are mistress here; it is yours to divide this bread amongst them: so will they thrive and not take any sickness. But let them not be milked till to-morrow evening, or they will give no more milk at all."

Yagna broke an altar-bread into five pieces, made the sign of the cross over each cow between her horns, and laid the thin bit of wafer upon her broad rough tongue.

Yuzka wanted to know whether the horses were also to get their share of the bread.

"It must not be; there were no horses in the byre where Christ was born."

When they had returned, Roch spoke thus:

"Every being, every meanest blade of grass, every little pebble, nay, even the star that is all but unseen to the eye—everything feels to-day, everything knows that the Lord is born."

"My God!" Yagna exclaimed. "What! even clods and stones?"

"I speak sooth: it is so. Everything has its soul. All beings in the world have feeling, and await the hour when Jesus, taking pity on them, shall say:

" 'Awake, O soul, and live, and merit Heaven!'—Yes, and the tiniest worm, the swaying grass even, can after its fashion have merit, and praise the Lord in its own way. . . . And to-night, of all nights in the year, they all rise up, full of life, and listen, waiting for His Word!

"And to some it comes now, but to others not yet: they lie patient in the dark, expecting the dawn; stones, water-drops, clods, trees, and whatever God has appointed each of them to be!"

Mute, they all pondered over the words he said; for he had spoken, and in sapient wise, and words which touched the heart. Yet both Boryna and Dominikova had doubts as to the truth of these; and, much as they turned them over and over in their minds, they could not clear up the matter. For, though God's Omnipotence was indeed marvellous and beyond all thought, still—that everything should have a soul!—this was what they could not grasp. But now, the smith having come in with his family, they set these thoughts aside.

"We shall sit up with you, Father, and then go together to midnight mass," he said.

"Sit down," said Boryna; "it will be more pleasant with you. We shall be all together, save for Gregory."

Yuzka looked indignantly at her father, for she thought of Antek: but she durst not say anything.

Once more they took their seats on benches by the fire; but Pete went out into the yard to chop fire-wood against the coming great Day of Rest, Vitek taking the chopped wood in his arms and piling it up in the passage.

"Ah! but I had forgotten!" cried the smith. "The Voyt ran and asked me to tell Dominikova she was to come at once; for his wife is in travail and screams so that she is likely to be confined this very night."

"I would have liked to go to church with you all; but since you say she screams, I must look in."

Having whispered with the smith's wife, she hastened away, for she was an expert in these matters, and to many had done more good than the doctors.

Various legends relating to the day were told by Roch: one of them was as follows:

"Long ago—as many years back as from now to Christ's Birth—a certain wealthy husbandman was walking home from market, where he had sold a couple of fatted calves, and had the money concealed in one of his boots. He bore a stout cudgel and was stout himself—perhaps the strongest fellow in his village. But he was in a hurry to get home ere nightfall, because in those days thieves used to hide in the woods and waylay true men.

"This must have been in summer, for the greenwood was fragrant and resounded with many a sweet song; a mighty wind rocked the trees, and there was an uproarious rustling overhead. Now, therefore, the man went along in haste, looking around him and fearing. But he saw only young and old pines and oaks standing side by side, and never a living soul. Yet he feared, for he was approaching a cross, and close by was so dense a thicket, the eye could not see to pierce it: there thieves were mostly wont to hide. So he crossed himself and, saying prayers in a loud voice, ran on as fast as he could.

"He had without hurt passed out of the wood of tall trees, and had gone through the undergrowth of dwarf pines and of juniper-bushes. Already he could see the green of the open country, hear the streamlets babbling and gurgling along and the lark singing on high; and he noted men ploughing and flocks of storks winging their way over the marshes; nay, he had even caught the scent of the cheery-orchards in blossom: when out of the last of the thickets the robbers came leaping upon him! They were twelve, all armed with knives. Bravely he fought, and though they soon overpowered him, he would not give up his money, and shrieked for help. So they threw him down, put their knees on his chest, and were going to slay him. Suddenly, they were all struck motionless, and remained so—bending over

him, knives in air, full of rage, but, as it were, turned to stone!—And at that same instant all things around also became still as death. The birds, silent, floated moveless in air—the streams rested—the sun rolled on no more—the wind fell dead—the trees remained as they were bent by the wind—and the corn also. And the storks seemed fixed in the sky, with outstretched wings . . . and the ploughman remained with whip raised over his horse where it stood . . . and the whole region, as if terror-struck, became immobile like a picture.

"How long this lasted, none can tell, but it endured until men heard upon earth the Angels' chant:

'Christ comes: fear Him, O ye mighty!'

when immediately all things began to move again. But the thieves took the warning given them by this prodigy, and released their victim; and they went together, following the voices they heard, to the stable; there they paid homage to the new-born Babe, along with all the creatures which lived on earth or in air."

They wondered much at the legend told them; but presently Boryna and the smith began to talk of other matters.

After a time, too, Yagustynka, who had all the time sat silent, spoke out, and with no pleasant words.

"Oh, ye talk, ye talk, ye talk: and wherefore, but only to make time pass? Were it true that of old there came from heaven those who protected the wretched and saved them from the oppressor: then why do they not come now too? Is there now less of poverty, less of misery, less of torture and of pain? Man is like a poor bird, unarmed, and let loose to fly about the world. The hawk, the beasts of prey, and want of food slay it; and him Crossbones always takes in the end.—And ye prate of mercy, and feed fools with promises, deluding them and saying that salvation is at hand! —Ah, who is at hand?—Antichrist! and he will deal out justice, and He will have mercy, even as the hawk has mercy on the chickens!"

Roch started up. "Woman!" he cried in a thundering voice; "do not blaspheme! do not hearken sinfully to the whispers of the Wicked One, that will drag you down to your damnation and to everlasting fire!"—But he fell back upon the bench, and could speak no more for the sobs that choked his voice, and shuddered from head to foot with horror and with sorrow for that lost soul. And when somewhat calmer, he set the truth before her with all the power of a firm believer, striving to bring her back into the right way.

He spoke to her long—very long; and as well as a priest in the pulpit.

Meanwhile Vitek, having been greatly struck to hear that cattle possessed human speech on Christmas Eve, called Yuzka away quietly, and they went both of them to the cow-house.

Holding each other by the hands, trembling with awe, and crossing themselves more than once, they slipped in amongst the cows.

Down they knelt by the side of the largest one, that they looked on as the Mother of the Byre. Out of breath, agitated, with tears in their eyes and dread in their hearts, as if they were in church and during the Elevation—they nevertheless were upheld by strong trust and a lively faith. Vitek put his mouth to her ear, and quavered in a low voice:

"Hist! Grey One! Grey One!"

But she only gurgled inaudibly, and went on chewing with a roll of her tongue and a smack of her lips.

"Something strange has come upon her: she answers naught!"

Then they knelt by the next cow, and Vitek, who by this time was on the verge of weeping, called earnestly to her:

"Spotted One! Spotted One!"

They both approached very close to her mouth, and listened, holding their breath; but never, never a word!

"Ah! no doubt we have sinned, so we shall not hear her speak. They answer only such as are sinless; and we are sinners!"

"True, Yuzka, true! we are sinful, we have sinned. O Lord! so it is! Aye, I stole some bits of string from master once. And an old strap besides. . . . Yes, and also . . ." He could go no farther; remorse and repentance for his faults shook the lad with a convulsion of tears and sobs; and Yuzka, following his example, wept from the bottom of her heart. They cried together, and would not be comforted till they had laid bare before each other all their "manifold sins and offences."

At home, no one remarked their absence, for all were piously singing hymns—not Christmas carols, which it was not deemed proper to strike up until after midnight.

On the other side of the house, Pete was having a wash and making a grand toilet. He had completely changed his clothes, Yagna having brought him another suit of his, that he had put by in the store-room.

But what a cry arose when he appeared before them, clad —no longer in his military cloak and grey uniform—but in the usual garb of a peasant!

"They laughed at me and nicknamed me Grey Dog," he faltered; "so I have changed my clothes."

"Change your speech, and not your garments!" Yagustynka snarled.

"That likewise he will get back, since his soul has remained Polish."

"And what marvel if he should forget something, after five years far away, never once hearing his mother-tongue spoken?"

Here they broke off their talk; the high-pitched tinkle of the mass-bell was now heard in the chamber.

"We must be off: it is ringing for the shepherd's mass!"

And in a very short time all had set out, save Yagustynka. She stayed to watch the house, and still more to loose the reins in solitude to the bitterness of her heart.

The mass-bell meantime rang, rang, rang, like the quick twitter of a bird, calling them to church.

Out of their cabins they poured; now and then a ruddy refulgence shone from the opening and closing doors, with a

flash as of lightning. In some huts, the fire was put out or covered. In the dark night, as they hurried on, a voice would be heard, or a cough, and the crunching of shoes on the snow, and the holy words of mutual greeting: and on they went, deeper and deeper into the dark-grey blackness, till only their footsteps sounded in the frozen air.

From afar they now began to perceive the glowing church-windows, and the great door thrown open and pouring forth light, and the people surging in—billows on billows, slowly filling the aisle, decorated with Christmas trees of many a kind; crowded along the white walls, swarming in front of the altar, filling the pews in an ever-rising flood, rolling and undulating to and fro with the incoming human tide, which brought in along with it a fog of condensed breath-vapour, so thick that the altar-lights shone dim and scarcely seen through its folds.

And still the people came in, came in continually.

They arrived from Polne Rudki in a compact mass, great tall fellows, ponderous, yet active, all flaxen-haired, all clad in blue-black capotes; their women comely, every one of them, adorned with "double" aprons, and having for head-gear caps underneath red kerchiefs.

Next came in straggling knots of twos and threes, the men of Modlitsa: poor sickly wretches, strengthless creatures, in grey patched capotes, and all bearing sticks, for they had come on foot. Of these the common tavern joke was that they lived on mud-fishes only, because their lands were miry and intersected with marshes, and their garments smelt of the peat they used for fuel.

From Vola, too, came some, by separate families, like the juniper-bushes that always grow in thick clumps and close together: none of them tall, but all of middle height, stumpy and not unlike sacks of corn, yet lively fellows: great talkers, most stubbornly litigious, given to fighting, and spoilers of the forests. They were in grey capotes, with facings of black braid, and red girdles.

There, too, was the "nobility" of Rzepki, which, as evil tongues say, "has only a bag and a bundle, one cow for five

and one cap for three"; they came all in one band, taciturn, looking down and askance at everyone they met. Their womenfolk, dressed like manor-people, very much pranked out, very handsome, white of complexion and voluble of tongue, walked in their midst, and were treated by them with the utmost courtesy.

Directly after them entered the men of Przylek, tall, slender and strong as trees in a pine-forest, and so decked out as to make the eye water: white capotes, red waistcoats, shirts adorned with green ribbons, breeches striped with yellow bands; and they pushed forwards, giving way to no one, till they got quite close to the altar.

And then, almost the last of all, like so many squires, in walked the people of Debie. They were but few; each went apart from the others, strutting proudly forwards, and took his place in the pews next to the high altar, having precedence of everyone; self-confident, because wealthy. Their womenfolk carried prayer-books, and wore white caps tied under the chin, and jackets of dark-coloured cloth.—And then there were also men from the more remote hamlets, from many a little cluster of huts, from sawmills, and from manors too—but who could count them all?

And in this multitude, pressed and surging and rustling like a wood in a breeze, the white capotes of the Lipka men and their women's red kerchiefs were conspicuous.

The church was full, even to the very last place in the porch, and anyone who came late had to pray outside under the trees in the cold.

Now the priest began the first mass, and the organ pealed forth, while all the people swayed to and fro, and bowed down, and knelt before the Divine Majesty.

There was a deep hush; fervent prayers went up; every eye was fixed on the priest, and on the one taper that burned high above and in the middle of the altar. The organ played soft music, fugues and harmonies so touchingly sweet that they sent a thrill to the very heart. At times the priest turned to the people with outstretched hands, uttering aloud certain sacred Latin words; and the people too extended their

arms, sighing audibly, and, bending down in deep contrition, struck their breasts and prayed with fervour.

Then, when the first mass was over, the priest mounted the pulpit, spoke of the sacred festival, and exhorted them to flee all things evil: his words went to their hearts like fire, and sounded like thunder through the church. Of his hearers, some sighed, some beat their breasts; others were sharply stung by remorse, and others again—those in particular who were of amatory disposition—fell a-weeping. For the priest spoke with true zeal and eloquence, his words went straight to the heart and mind; and however drowsy the heat in the church had made more than one, even these could not but listen to him.

Just before the second mass, the organ pealed out again, and the priest intoned the famous carol:

"Come to meet Him—come to greet Him!"

and the people started up from their knees as one man, with a billowing swirl, took up the tune, and roared in unison, with a loud blast from each man's lungs:

"Jesus in the manger laid!"

The Christmas trees vibrated and shook with the din, and the lights flickered in the enormous volume of sound.

So united were they, in souls and faith and voices, that it seemed as if a giant were trolling forth that tremendous chant that rolled, carrying every heart along with it, to the sacred feet of the Divine Child!

When the second mass was over, the organist struck up one Christmas carol after another, and to such lively leaping measures that it was all they could do to hold back from leaping too; but at any rate they all turned round to the organ-loft, and shouted the words in tune and time with the music.

Antek alone was not singing with the others. He had come with his wife and with Staho's family, but had let them go on before him, he himself standing close to the pews.

He had no mind to take his old place among the farmers in front of the altar, and was looking for a place somewhere else, when he perceived his father coming in with all his family, pushing forward to the centre of the nave, with Yagna going first of them all.

He shrank back behind a young fir-tree, and thenceforward never took his eyes off her. She sat down at the end of a pew close to the side gangway; and he, unconsciously obeying instinct, pressed forward with stubborn jostling, till he was close to her; and when all knelt down during mass, he too knelt and bent forward so that his head touched her knees.

She at first took no notice of him: the rushlight she was using to read by shed so faint a glimmer round, and the fir boughs concealed him so well that he could not be seen. It was only at the Elevation, when, going down on her knees, she beat her breast and bowed her head in adoration, that she happened to look in his direction—and her heart suddenly stopped beating, and she was petrified with joy.

She durst not look a second time. What she had seen was but a dream to her; a vision—a "false creation," and no more.

She closed her eyes and remained long on her knees, with head bowed down, and body bent forward—almost beside herself with excitement. At last, however, she seated herself and looked him straight in the face.

Yes, it was really he—Antek—his face very haggard and bronzed; and those eyes of his, so bold and daring, now looked into hers with such sorrowful tenderness that her heart was smitten through and through with affectionate apprehension, and the tears came to her eyes.

Like the other women there, she sat stiffly, apparently reading in her book in which she saw not a single letter, nor even the page before her. What she did see was his face—his eyes, so sad, so full of appeal, flashing, blazing, bright as stars, coming between her and the rest of the world. She felt lost and helpless—and he was kneeling by her side; and she heard his quick breath and felt it hot, and was aware of the dear, yet awful might which went forth

from him, seized upon her heart, bound it to him as with cords, thrilling her at once with pleasure and dismay—with a vertiginous shuddering, and a cry for love so potent that her every limb quaked, and her heart beat wildly like some poor bird nailed in sport by the wings to a barn-door!

The second mass was now over, and the people were all singing together, and praying and sighing and weeping; but these two, as if beyond this world, heard nothing, saw nothing, thought of nothing but each other.

Dread — joy — affection — remembrance — enchantment —desire!—all these feelings alternately glowed within them, passing from one to the other, and knitting them in one, so that they felt themselves one being, and their two hearts throbbed in unison, and one fire flamed in the eyes of each.

Antek came yet a little nearer, leaned his shoulder against her hip (and a hot flush surged over her, and she was nigh to swooning); and as she knelt again, he flung these words —words that might have been brands of fire—into her ear:

"Yagna! Yagna!"

She shook, and almost fell fainting; his voice pierced her through and through with keen rapture—with a sharp-edged delight.

"Come out some evening . . . come out . . . behind the haystack . . . I shall be waiting there every night. . . . Fear not . . . I must speak to you. . . . 'Tis urgent.—Come." This he said in an impassioned whisper, very close to her—so close that his breath was like a flame upon her face.

She replied nothing: the words stuck in her throat. Her heart was palpitating so violently that she thought everyone near her must have heard it. But she made a gesture as if she would go that very instant where he wished, where her love was urging her . . . behind the haystack.

The church was resounding with the joyful thunder of the carols, when she came a little to her senses, and looked round at the people and the sanctuary.

Antek was there no more. He had withdrawn unnoticed, and was slowly walking out into the churchyard.

There he stood in the frost a long time, beneath the belfry, that he might cool down a little and breathe some fresh air. But his bosom was so overflowing with gladness, there was in him such an exultation, such a triumph of power, that he never even heard the chant that welled out from the open church door, nor the faint echoes which repeated it from the bells above. No, he took no heed of anything whatsoever. . . .

Seizing a handful of snow, and swallowing it greedily, he leapt over the wall and into the road—rushing away, out on to the country-side, wayward as the blast.

CHAPTER V

THE Boryna family returned from church very late; and but a few minutes later, they were all in bed, snoring loud. All except Yagna alone. Wearied though she was, she did not fall asleep. She turned on her pillow, she even threw the blanket over her head: it was of no avail; sleep would not come. In its stead there came a sort of nightmare, and fell upon her, and crushed her with its weight. She could neither breathe, nor cry out, nor jump from her bed. There she lay, numb, drowsy, in that half-awake state when the mind spins out memories all the while and goes over the world with them—rising far above the earth, arraying itself in the sun's splendour, and yet no more capable of any activity in itself than is a reflection in clear wind-rippled water.

Thus it was with her: though she did not fall asleep, yet her mind was wandering about like a bird through the days of the dead past, through those times that were now no more, and lived only in memory. She was back again in the church, with Antek kneeling beside her, and speaking—speaking—and burning her with those eyes of flame, and filling her with a sweet torture and dismay! . . . And then appeared the flushed and threatening face of the priest, and his hand stretched out over the people . . . and the lighted tapers. . . . Then came other reminiscences—old ones: her meetings with Antek . . . their kisses—their embraces . . . till she was full of such a fever of excitement and delectation that she stretched and pressed herself down on the pillow with all her might. . . . And then, once more, she heard, clear and distinct, the words: "Come out! Come out!" And it seemed to her that, rising at the call, she walked, walked on, skulking along through the brushwood

in the dark, shaken with terror, followed by a hue-and-cry, and an awful wind blowing after her among the shadows.

And so this went on unceasingly, one impression after another . . . and a third . . . and a fourth . . . and so on, beyond counting: she could in no wise either get rid of these fancies of hers or control them. A nightmare had her in its clutches; or . . . was it Satan preparing her to sin by tempting her thus?

It was broad day when she got out of bed, and she felt as though she had spent the night on a rack. Every bone in her ached; she was pale, worn out, unspeakably miserable.

The frost had slackened a little, but the weather was dull. Now and again it snowed; and then a great wind would spring up, worry the trees, and go whistling down the road. The village, however, was lively and full of the gladness of Yule-tide, and the roads swarmed with folk. Some were dashing by in sledges; some talked outside their huts or went visiting their neighbours; and the children played about in the lanes, and there was everywhere noise and merriment in plenty.

But of merriment there was little in Yagna's heart. For all the joyous flickering of the fire on the hearth, she felt cold: moody in spite of all the mirth and din around her, and the gay songs of Yuzka, ringing through the cabin. Though amongst her own people, she was alone—so terribly alone that she was afraid to look upon them.

And frequently, whilst letting her fancy listen to Antek's passionate whispers, she could not help hearing at the same time certain other words that went to her soul with no less force:

"To all such God's wrath is reserved, and everlasting damnation!"—She could distinctly hear the priest's voice, and see his glowing face, and his hand stretched out in a threatening gesture.

She quailed at the vision, feeling acutely the depth of her guilt.—"Then I will not go, I will not! It were a mortal sin, a mortal sin!" she repeated to herself, striving to find in these words the strength to resist and a shield against evil.

But then her soul revolted with the pain of it; for indeed she was attracted to him with all the might and bent of her vital forces, and turned towards him as a snow-burdened tree turns towards the sun in spring.

But the fear of sin had still the upper hand, and she did her best to forget him—forget him for ever! . . . She now stayed at home, fearing to go anywhere about the premises, lest he might be lurking about and call to her. . . . For would she then be able to resist, and not to follow his voice?

She set about diligently to perform her home duties; but there was little to be done. Yuzka managed all; besides, the old man was always after her, unwilling to have her put her hand to anything.

"Rest yourself; do not work too much, lest some untimely harm come upon you!"

So she did nothing, and only wandered aimlessly about the cabin, or looked out of the windows—at nothing—or stood idle in the passage. Meanwhile her longing and her desire increased continually; and her irritation as well. She was angered by her husband's watchful eyes, angered by the joy and liveliness that filled the place; angered even by Bociek the stork, walking about the hut, and flapped her apron to drive it away. At last, when she could bear things no longer, she chose a convenient opportunity, and ran over to her mother's hut. But she went there straight across the pond, looking round in fear, lest he should be lurking somewhere behind a tree.

Her mother was not at home; she had only looked in early in the day, and then returned to attend the Voyt's wife. Andrew sat smoking by the fireside, while Simon dressed himself in the bedroom.

Back in her old place, amongst her own furniture and surroundings, a change came over her and her irritation disappeared. She was once more in her element, and began instinctively to move about and do things: going to the cow-house, straining out the milk which had since the morning been standing in the pail, throwing corn to the fowls, sweeping the room, setting things in order, and meantime

keeping up a brisk conversation with her two brothers; for Simon, having put on a new capote, had now come in, and was doing his hair before the looking-glass.

"So carefully dressed?—Whither away?"

"To the village, to meet a few lads at the Ploshkas'."

"And . . . will mother let you go?"

"I shall not everlastingly ask her leave: my reason is my own; so is my will."

"Surely, surely," Andrew chimed in timorously, looking out into the road.

"You are to know," the other cried with a bold air, "that what I do, I will do in spite of her. To the Ploshkas', aye, and to the tavern as well, will I go, and drink with the other lad."

" 'A calf wants but its mother's teat, yet wanders everywhere for it. So with the fool, whose will's his rule,' " she murmured to herself, not caring to contradict him, nor indeed paying much heed to what he said. She was to return home now, and had so small a mind to do so, that it was almost with tears that she took leave of them, and dragged herself slowly away.

At her cabin, it was still noisier and merrier than before. Nastka had run in, and was laughing so gaily with Yuzka that Yagna could hear them out in the road.

"Do you know? my rod has blossomed!" she cried to Yagna as the latter entered.

"Your rod? what rod?"

"The one I cut on St. Andrew's night, planted in sand upon the stove—and behold, it has blossomed! I looked at it yesterday, and there was not a single blossom yet."

She brought the pot of sand to show her; there stood in it a rather large spray of a cherry-tree, studded with delicate blossoms.

"Oh, what fragrant pink flowers!" said Vitek wistfully.

"So they are, so they are!"

All crowded round, and gazed on the sweet-scented spray with great joy and wonder. But just then Yagustynka came

in, now again her former self, loud of speech, bold, and always seeking an opportunity to sting someone to the quick.

"Aye, Yuzka, the rod has blossomed, but not for you: what you need yet is the strap, or a good stout cudgel!" Thus she spoke at once on entering.

"For me, for me, it has blossomed!" she cried. "I myself cut it on St. Andrew's night: I myself!"

"But," Yagna explained, "you are as yet too young; no doubt it has foretold Nastka's marriage."

"We both together put it in the pot; but I cut it, and so it has blossomed for me!" Yuzka insisted, while the tears sprang to her eyes, because her right to the prediction was not admitted.

"Plenty of time before you, Yuzka, to run after young men and wait at stiles for them: let your elders go first," said Yagna, smiling at Nastka. "So, Yuzka, be quiet.—Here's news for you all: that Magda who was at the organist's gave birth in the church porch last night!"

"Can such a thing be?"

"It can, for it has been. When Ambrose went out to ring, he stumbled over the girl."

"O Lord! and she did not die of cold?"

"No, not she; but her child did. Yet she all but died herself. They took her to the priest's dwelling, and they are tending her still. But . . . 'twere better they had let her alone. What has she to live for? Can aught of good come to her now?"

"Matthew told me that when the organist turned her away, she was always at the miller's, and staying there overnight, till at last—probably by the miller's directions—her Franek beat her and sent her flying."

"Well," said Yagustynka, "what was he to do with her? Frame her like a picture and hang her up, hey?—Franek is like his fellows: 'He of oaths made a lot; what he wanted he got—and then kept them not.' Not faultless he, not by any means: but the organist is by far the worst of all. While she was well, they made her work as much as a yoke

of oxen ploughing: she alone did everything for them. And now, as soon as she is ill, they have driven her away! A murrain on such folk!"

"But," Naska cried, "wherefore did she yield to Franek?"

"And you also would yield to Yasyek, were you but sure that the banns would follow!"

Nastka took offense at this, and a quarrel seemed imminent, but Boryna came in at that moment, and they said no more.

"Do ye know about Magda? She is still living, but in a dead faint. Had she been left there the space of another 'Pater,' Ambrose says, she would have turned up her toes. Roch is rubbing her with snow, and giving her to drink; but they think she will not be well for a long time."

"And whither is she to go then, poor thing?"

"No doubt the Koziols will take her to their home: she is a kinswoman of theirs."

"The Koziols, indeed! Why, they have naught themselves but what they can filch or get by cheating: how could they nurse her? And here we have so many wealthy men and landowners, and none will come forward to help her!"

"Yes, yes," Boryna said; "farmers have endless treasures, and everything falls to them from the sky, and their only business is to help everyone! What, shall I gather all the needy on all the highways, bring them in here, and feed and nurse them, and pay the doctor for them, perhaps, into the bargain?—Ye are old, Yagustynka, and the wind blows in your head."

"I say not that anyone can be forced to aid the needy; but yet men are not beasts, nor should they be left to perish out of doors."

"Well, things in this world are as they are, and must remain so, and ye will not change them."

"Long ago, before the war—in the days when the nobles were masters, there was, I remember, a hospital in the village for poor people. Yes, and it was in the very house where the organist dwells now. And I remember, too, folk had to pay to keep it up—so much out of every acre they had."

Boryna was annoyed and surly: he did not care to discuss the matter, and closed the debate with:

"Talking of this will do as much good as incense burnt to bring the dead to life."

"True, no good at all. On him that feels no pity for the cries of those who suffer, their tears too will have no effect. The thriving man thinks that all in this world goes well and as God has commanded."

To this Boryna gave no reply, so Yagustynka turned to Nastka.

"And what about Matthew's ribs? Any better?"

"Matthew? why, what has befallen him?"

"What!" Nastka exclaimed; "do ye not know of it? It came to pass ere Yule-tide. . . . Your Antek flew at him, took him by the throat, carried him out of the mill, and dashed him against the fence so hard that the railing broke. He fell in and was like to drown. Now he is ill, and spits blood, and cannot move. Ambrose says he has four ribs broken, and his womb is out of place.[1] And now he is always moaning and groaning."

She burst into tears.

At the first words, Yagna had started up, struck with the feeling that the fight had been about herself. But presently she sat down again upon a chest, pressing her lips to the cherry-blossoms to cool them.

Those of the house were astounded: though the incident was the talk of the whole village, no whisper of it had yet come to Boryna's cabin.

He growled: "Like has fallen foul of like—one ruffian of another. No great harm done!"

"But," Yagna inquired after a pause, "why did they fight?"

"On account of you!" the old woman said, with a spiteful snarl.

"Pray speak the truth!"

"It is as I say. Matthew was at the mill, boasting in

[1] Compare this anatomical error with what Falstaff says, "Henry IV," Part 2, Act IV, Sc. 3.—*Translator's Note.*

the presence of some men that he had been with you in your bedroom. . . . And Antek heard, and gave him a beating."

"Spare me your jests; I have no mind to hear them!"

"Will you not believe me? Then ask the whole village; they will tell you the same. Did I say that Matthew was speaking true? Nay, I only repeated the village talk."

"He is a liar . . . a foul liar and a villain!"

"Who can protect you from evil tongues? They will often slander you beyond the grave."

" 'Tis well . . . 'tis well he beat him! . . . I fain would add to the beating!" she hissed vindictively.

"Oho! The chicken's claws turn a hawk's talons!"

"Aye! for the lie he told, I would kill him on the spot, the false hound!"

"To everyone I say he lies, but they believe me not, and backbite you."

"Oh, but Antek will silence them—cut their tongues out!"

Yagustynka leered at her maliciously. "Is he to fight the whole world for you, eh?"

"O you Judas woman, you! With your sly hints and whispers, and the joy you take in giving pain!"

Yagna was now in a towering passion; perhaps she had never yet been so angry in her life. What she felt would have been beyond bearing, but for Antek's conduct that she now heard of. She was flooded with tenderness, and unspeakable gratitude filled her heart that he had so well taken her part and avenged her. Nevertheless, she exhibited so much ill temper at everything that went on in the house, and rated Yuzka and Vitek so sternly for every trifle, that old Boryna felt uneasy, and came to sit by her side, stroking her face and asking:

"What is it ails my Yagna?"

"What should ail me? Naught.—Let me be: would ye make love before everybody?" And she pushed him roughly away.

"He would soothe and blandish and cuddle her, would he? That withered fellow, that spent worn-out old man!" she thought, and a feeling of strong dislike welled up within

her. Not till now had she noticed his age; now, for the first time, there came to her a sense of loathing, a deep-seated repugnance, almost hatred. She now looked upon him with glad concealed contempt; for he had really aged a good deal in these last days: his hands were shaking, and he dragged his feet and stooped.

"That nerveless old driveller!"

She shook herself with disgust, and set to thinking all the more intensely of Antek. No longer did she strive against the memories that pressed upon her, nor seek not to hear those sweet tempting whispers of his.

The day dragged on, intolerably slow. Every minute she would go out into the porch, or as far as the orchard behind the hut, and look through the trees at the fields beyond . . . or lean against the wattled fence which stood between her and the village road that ran past the farm buildings. With wistful looks, she would scan the country-side—the snow-covered lands—the dark forest at the sky-line. . . . But she took note of nothing, so deep was she plunged in the joyous knowledge that *he* cared for her, and would let no one do her wrong.

"And he would serve anyone the same! What a man he is, what a fighter!" she thought with tender admiration. "Oh, if he came in sight now, I could not resist him for one instant!"

The haystack stood close by, near the road, but at some distance within the field. Flocks of sparrows chirruped round it, and took shelter in a great hole that had been scooped out of one side. The farm-lad, though ordered by Boryna to go up and take the hay always from the top, had not cared to do so, but pulled truss after truss out of the side, till enough had gone to form a sort of small den, in which two persons might easily find room.

"Come out—come out behind the haystack!" Her mind was continually repeating Antek's petition. But now she ran back to the hut; the bells were beginning to ring for Vespers, and she herself had a longing to go to church, in the vague hope of meeting him there.

Him she did not meet: but instead, in the very entrance, she saw Hanka, greeted her, and held back for her to put her hand first into the holy water stoup. But Hanka neither made answer nor stretched out her hand to the stoup, but passed on, darting out of her eyes a look at her—a deadly look! as though she would have stoned her willingly.

Yagna's eyes grew dim. Such a slight! so open an exhibition of hate! Yet, from the pew in which she seated herself, she could not help fixing her eyes on that pallid face.

"Antek's wife—and so haggard, so ghastly to see! Well, well!" But her thoughts soon wandered away from Hanka. They were singing in the choir, and the organ played sweet music, so low and soft and mysterious that it absorbed all her attention. Never, no, never had she felt so happy in church, so serenely blissful! She did not even say prayers; her book lay before her unopened; her beads were in her hand, but she did not tell them. She sighed dreamily, and looked up to see the shadows creeping slowly in through the windows, and to gaze on the pictures, the scintillating lights, the gilded woodwork, and the now scarce visible many-coloured decorations. Amongst all these marvels, her soul soared up, lost itself in the painted skies, in the chanted prayers and the faint dying melodies that she heard. Dissolved in a serene ecstasy, oblivious of everything round her, she fancied she saw the saints come down out of their pictures, approach her with smiles of infinite kindness, and stretch forth their hands in blessings over her and over all the people.

She ceased to dream only when Evensong was at an end and the organ hushed. The silence roused her from her trance; unwillingly she rose and went out with the others. And now again, at the church-door, she met with Hanka, who stood and faced her as though intending to speak—but only darted a look of hatred at her and went out.

"What, does the silly woman think to daunt me by glaring?" was Yagna's mental comment as she walked home.

Evening had fallen now—quiet, dull, holy. It was murky outside; the stars' faint light shone dim in the hazy sky;

a little snow came down, flake by flake, looking like long fluffy threads, and noiselessly fluttering past the window-panes.

In the cabin, too, it was quiet and somewhat dull. Simon had come as soon as evening had closed in—ostensibly to visit them, but really to meet with Nastka; and the two sat side by side, talking in low voices. Boryna was not home yet. Yagustynka sat on one side of the fire-place, peeling potatoes. On the other, Pete was playing a tune on his violin, very gently, but with such sad notes that now and then Lapa would whine, or vent a long-drawn howl. Vitek was there too, along with Yuzka. After a time, Yagna, whom the tune made nervous, called out from the bedroom:

"Pete, pray leave off: that music of yours is too dismal!"

And the violin sounded no more. But presently it was heard anew; for subdued strains, all but inaudible, now came from the stable, whither Pete had withdrawn; and there he continued playing far into the night. When Boryna came in, supper was getting ready.

"Well, the Voyt's wife is brought to bed. Folk are swarming there so that Dominikova has to drive them off, they come in such crowds. Yagna, you must go and see her to-morrow."

"Instantly—I will go instantly!" she cried, excited and eager all at once.

"Very well; and I'll go with you."

"Ah! Perhaps to-morrow will do better." And she added, to explain her quick change of mind: "Yes, I should prefer going in the day-time. The snow is falling, it is dark, and you say there are so many people."

He acquiesced; all the more readily because the smith's wife and children entered the hut just then.

"Why, where is your goodman?"

"At Vola. The threshing-machine there is out of order, and the manor blacksmith cannot put it to rights."

"Somehow," Yagustynka observed, in tones full of significance, "somehow he goes very often to the manor now."

"Have ye any objection?"

"None in the world. I only note one thing and another, and watch to see what will come of it all."

Her words failed to set tongues wagging; no one cared to talk loud. Each spoke to his neighbour in drowsy whispers; all were heavy with sleep, of which they had had too little the night before. They supped, too, with but little relish, and looked (not without surprise) at Yagna, who was in high spirits, bustling about the room, pressing them to eat, even after they had laid down their spoons, bursting into laughter, no one knew why, and sitting down beside the girls and talking nonsense, to break off on a sudden and run out to the other lodgings . . . and return when she had got only as far as the passage. Truth is, she was racked with a fever of anguish and dread. The evening wore away sluggishly, wearily, whilst her longing to go out behind the hut—to the haystack—grew ever stronger and stronger. Yet she could not make up her mind to go. She feared to be seen —she feared to commit sin. She was putting forth all her power of self-control, and trembling with the agony of effort; her soul cried out for liberty like a chained-up dog; her heart was rent within her. No, no! she could not bear it! . . . Perhaps he was standing there . . . looking about for her . . . he might be prowling round the cabin. . . . Perhaps, hidden in the orchard, he was even then looking in at the window at her . . . and imploring . . . and pining away with sad desire! . . . Then she thought she would run out, but only for a minute . . . only to say one word, to tell him he must not come to her nor she to him, for it was a sin. . . . And now she was looking for her apron to put it on . . . and now she made for the door. . . . But there something caught hold of her by the nape of the neck, as it were, and pulled her back.—Yagustynka's eyes followed each of her movements, like a sleuth-hound.—Nastka too looked strangely at her.—And the old man too!—Did they know? had they found out anything? . . . "No, no; I will not go out to-day."

Lapa, barking outside the hut, roused her at last from the state of obsession she was in. The cabin was nearly

empty. Only Yagustynka sat there, dozing by the fireside. Her goodman, too, was standing at the window and looking out; for the dog barked more and more furiously.

"No doubt, Antek, no longer able to wait, had now . . ." She broke off in terror.

But only old Klemba stood there in the doorway. Behind him, shaking and stamping the snow off their clothes and boots, came Vinciorek, Gregory "the Lame," Michael Caban, Franek Bylitsa (Hanka's uncle), Valenty "the Wry-mouthed," and Joseph Vahnik!

Boryna marvelled much at this deputation, as it seemed to be, but said not a word, except to answer their greetings. He shook hands all round, bade them be seated on the benches he pushed forwards, and offered his snuff-box.

They all sat down in a row, and took a pinch, nothing loath; one sneezed, another blew his nose, a third wiped his eyes, the snuff being of first-class strength. . . . They then looked round them, and some spoke a few words—about the snowy weather, about hard times—while others assented with grunts and nods: all, however, approaching at leisure the object of their visit.

Boryna shifted uneasily on his bench, stared at them, and attempted by various means to draw them out and learn what they would have of him.

He failed. They sat there in a row, hoary-headed clean-shaven old men, nearly of an age, hale as yet, though bowed down by years and labour; ponderous as moss-grown boulders in the fields, rugged, tough-sinewed, ungainly, but hard-headed and shrewd, they fought shy of speaking before the time, and approached the matter in hand circuitously, as sagacious sheep-dogs do a flock they aim at driving through a gate.

At length, however, Klemba cleared his throat, expectorated, and said with a dignified mien:

"How long shall we hang back and beat about the bush? We come to know if ye are on our side or not."

"Without you we cannot decide aught."

"For ye are the first man amongst us all."

"And wisdom has been given you by our Lord."

"And though ye have no office, yet are ye the leader of us all."

"Also our common interests are at stake."

Each man had his say, and every one was so complimentary to Boryna that he turned red, held up his hands in deprecation, and exclaimed:

"Kind friends, I do not even know as yet what brings you hither!"

"Our forest! After Twelfth Night, they intend to cut it down."

"I know they even now saw timber at the mill."

"But that belongs to Jews in Rudka, as we thought ye knew."

"I did not: I have little time to go about and question folk."

"Yet ye were first to make complaint against the Squire?"

"Because I thought that he had sold the timber of our clearing."

"Why, whose else? say whose!" Caban interrupted.

"That on the land he bought himself; his own."

"Aye, but he also has sold the timber of Vilche Doly, and they are now to cut it down!"

"That he can only do if we agree!"

"And yet the trees are marked already; they have measured out the land, and will begin to fell the timber after Twelfth Night."

"If 'tis thus"—Boryna paused to reflect—"if so, then we shall enter a complaint before the commissary."

"'From seed-time to harvest, complainant, thou starvest!'" Caban muttered; and Valenty "the Wry-mouthed" chimed in:

"'In dying condition, folk need no physician.'"

"A complaint will do this much: ere the official prohibition is issued, there will not remain a single stump of the wood—*our* wood.—Remember what they did at Debitsa!"

"'The wolf that tastes a single lamb, with the whole flock its maw will cram.' The manor folk are like the wolf."

"This," Boryna said, "must be prevented."

"Matthias, these are words of wisdom. To-morrow, when mass is over, the farmers are to meet at my cabin and see what we should do; and they have sent to ask you to come over with good advice."

"Shall they all be there?"

"Yes, and just after mass."

"To-morrow?—What can I do?—You see, I must be to-morrow at Vola without fail. Kinsmen of mine are dividing land there, quarrelling and bringing actions one against another. I have promised to arbitrate there, so that the orphans shall suffer no wrong. So I must go; but I agree to stand by the meeting's decision."

They left the hut somewhat dissatisfied. He had approved them and agreed with all they said; but they had the impression he was not sincerely holding with them.

"You will decide as you choose," he was thinking; "I shall be clear of it. Neither the Voyt, nor the miller, nor any of the foremost men here follow you. . . . The Squire, if he knows I am not hostile to him, will compensate me more willingly for the cow; and he may come to an understanding with each of us separately.—They are foolish: it were better to let him cut the very last sapling down—and then go to law—lodge a complaint—get an injunction—and so wring out of him far more than he would have given by any agreement."

Long after everyone else was in bed, Matthias still sat up, poring over a board on which he had made calculations with chalk, and revolving many things in his mind.

The next day, immediately after breakfast, he ordered the sledge to be got ready.

"As I said last night, I am off to Vola. Yagna, take good care of the house; if anyone should ask after me, say I was obliged to go.—And do not forget to look in at the Voyt's."

"Will ye come home late?" she asked, concealing the joy she felt.

"About supper-time: perhaps later."

He put on his best suit, which she brought him from the

store-room. Instead of a button, she passed a ribbon through his shirt button-holes and tied it; she helped him to dress, and hurried Pete on, with feverish impatience to get the horses harnessed in a trice. She was all the time in rapid movement, and her heart cried out for gladness: her goodman would be absent for the whole day, and was to return late . . . perhaps only near midnight! While she would remain alone!—And at dusk—at dusk—she could go out—out behind the haystack! Aha! . . . She exulted in her soul; her eyes beamed with laughter, she stretched and drew herself up; shocks as of tingling and burning electric fluid went through her with most exquisitely sweet torment. . . . And then, all at once and unexpectedly, a strange feeling of dread took hold of her, and a dead hush came over her soul, and she looked on, as one dazed, at Boryna, as he put on his cap and gave his orders to Vitek.

"Oh, pray, pray, take me with you!" she whispered low.

"But—but," Boryna stammered in astonishment, "who will take your place at home?"

"Yet take me.—It is St. Stephen's feast to-day, and there is little to do. Take me; I feel so dejected here!" And she begged so hard that—much as he wondered at her whim—he made no further difficulties. A few minutes later, she was ready, and off they set from the hut, the sledge swaying and sweeping round with all the might of straining hocks and beating hoofs.

CHAPTER VI

"I THOUGHT," he muttered sourly, "you'd been lost in some snow-drift!"

"In such a storm as this, how could I go faster? I had to grope my way along, for the snow blew in my eyes so, I could not keep them open; and it drives along the roads so thick that it hides everything two paces away."

"Your mother at home?"

"Surely; where else, in such villainous weather? She was at the Koziols, this morning. Magda is in a bad way, though, and like to go to the churchyard, 'the priest's cow-byre.'" So answered Yagna, shaking the snow from her clothes.

"Any gossip abroad?" he inquired, chaffing her.

"Go out and ask, and ye will know. I did not run thither to gossip."

"Do you know that the Squire is here?"

"Here? In such a storm it were hard to keep a dog out of doors; and he has freely chosen to come?"

"'Who must, will go, even through storms of snow.'"

"Yes, who must." She smiled sceptically.

"He himself promised; no one asked him," Boryna answered sternly. Then he set aside a barrel hoop he was working at, and got up to look out at the window; but such a hurricane of snow filled the air, whirling and swirling outside, that neither trees nor fences were visible.

"I think the snow is not coming down any more," he added, more gently.

"No, it is only blown and swept about so, that one cannot see one's way," Yagna replied, warming her hands, and setting to wind the thread from a spindle on to a reel. Her husband, after again peeping out of the window, and listening with still greater impatience, took up his work.

"Yuzka—where is she?" he asked presently.

"Gone to Nastka's, no doubt; she is always there."

"The girl's a gadabout—never at home for the space of a 'pater.'"

"She says staying at home is wearisome."

"Wants to divert herself, the little chit!"

"No; to shirk her duties, rather."

"Can ye not forbid her?"

"I? Once I did; and was abused and railed at for my pains. Ye must give her orders yourself: mine are of no account."

To this complaint Boryna paid little attention; he was listening with extreme impatience. But no human voice was audible outside, only the gale blowing, roaring here and there, and smiting the walls till they vibrated and groaned again.

"Going out?" she asked.

He made no answer, hearing the front door open; and immediately Vitek ran in, out of breath, and crying out, as he entered:

"The Squire has come!"

"Only now? Shut the door, quick!"

"I can hear the jingling of his harness-bells still."

"Did he come alone?"

"I could only distinguish the horses, the air was so thick."

"Run this instant and find out where he has stopped."

"Shall ye go to him?" she asked, with bated breath.

"Not until he has asked to see me; I shall not invite myself. But without me he can do nothing."

There was a pause: Yagna winding up threads, counting them and making them into skeins, while her goodman, so impatient that he could not work any longer, laid the things down and was preparing to go out . . . when in bolted Vitek!

"The Squire is at the miller's, in his front room—and his horses stand in the yard."

"How have you dirtied yourself so?"

"The wind blew me into a snow-drift."

"Say rather you were fighting with other young rascals in the snow!"

"No, it was the wind!"

"Aye, aye: tear your clothes, do: you'll get such a beating from me as you'll remember!"

"But it's true what I say. It blows and blusters so, one can scarcely keep one's feet."

"Get away from the fire-place; you will warm yourself enough later.—Go to Pete, tell him to do some threshing; and you are to help him—not run about the village like a dog with its tongue lolling out."

"I go," he answered sulkily; "but I must first bring firewood, as mistress ordered me." He sorely wished to tell what he had seen in the village. Going out, he whistled to Lapa, but the dog, curled up by the fireside, paid no heed to him. Boryna, dressed to go, went about the cabin, poked the logs, peeped into the stable, looked out of the window, and waited with growing restlessness to be sent for; but no one came.

"He may have forgotten," Yagna hazarded.

"Forgotten?—Forgotten *me?*"

"Perhaps. Ye trust the blacksmith so, and he is such a liar."

"You are a fool. Speak not of what ye do not understand."

Offended, she became mute. He tried in vain to bring her round with kind words, and at last he too lost his temper, snatched up his cap and strode out, slamming the door.

Yagna, having supplied her distaff with flax, sat down by the window, and began to spin, with a glance from time to time at the tempest of snow that raged outside.

The wind howled deafeningly. Great clouds of powdery snow, as large as houses, torn and tattered and formless, were whisked about in every direction, and again and again broke upon the cabin walls, making every beam and rafter tremble, rattling the contents of the sideboard, and swinging to and fro Yuzka's "globes" and "stars" that dangled overhead.

A draught, piercingly cold, came in through the doors and windows, making Yagna throw her apron over her shoulders, and Lapa more than once shift his place for a warmer nook.

Vitek entered noiselessly, and said, not without hesitation:

"Mistress!"

"Well?"

"Do you know, the Squire has driven over with stallions! Carriage-horses they are, black as night, with red netting and plumes on their heads, and tinkling bells about their flanks; and they shine like the gildings in the church. And how they did fly past! Oh, faster far than the wind!"

"Of course.—They are not peasants' horses: they belong to the manor."

"O Lord! I never saw such wonderful beasts!"

"Could they be otherwise, with no field-work to do, and feeding on naught but oats?"

"Ye are right, mistress.—But should we feed our filly so, and dock her tail, and harness her together with the Voyt's mare, would they go as well as these?"

The dog started up in alarm, and barked.

"Someone is in the passage: see who it is."

But ere Vitek could do so, a man, crusted over with snow, appeared on the threshold, "praised God," beat his cap on the leg of his boot, and looked round the room.

"Pray let me breathe a space and warm myself here," he gasped.

"Be seated," she replied, in some confusion. "Vitek, put more logs on the fire."

The stranger sat down on the hearth, warmed himself, and lit a pipe.

"Is this the dwelling of Boryna—Matthias Boryna?" he asked, consulting a paper.

"It is," she answered, fearing she might have to do with someone of the police.

"Is your father at home?"

"My *husband* is gone to the village."

"Allow me to wait here a little, warming myself by the fire: I am quite frozen."

"You are welcome: neither bench nor fire will lose thereby."

He took off his sheepskin coat, but had evidently been chilled to the marrow, for he shivered all over, rubbed his hands, and drew nearer and nearer still to the fire.

"This year," he remarked, "we have a bitterly hard winter."

"Of a truth, it is not mild.—May I heat a little milk for you?"

"No, thanks; but I should like some tea."

"We had some not long since, in autumn, when my goodman had pains inside, and I got some from town for him; but it is all run out, and I cannot say where I could obtain any here."

"Why," Vitek put in, "his Reverence is drinking tea all day long."

"Would you run to him and borrow some?"

"No need. I have some by me—if you would give me some water. . . ."

"I shall boil some at once."

She placed a pot on the fire, and returned to her spinning, but spun no more; while she seemed to be twirling the spindle, she was scanning him with great curiosity.—Who could he be? what did he want? Was he a man of the police, making out some list? the paper he was always consulting seemed to point to that.—His apparel, too, was not of her class: grey and green, like the hunting-dress of a manor-house footman. . . . But again, he was wearing a peasant's sheepskin and cap!—He might possibly be an eccentric fellow, or perhaps a world-ranger.

Thus she pondered, exchanging glances with Vitek, who, apparently gazing into the fire, scrutinized the stranger, and was much surprised to hear him try and make friends with Lapa.

"Pray beware: that dog bites!" he could not help exclaiming.

"Fear naught!" he said, and, with a singular smile, he patted the dog's head, come to rest on his knees.

Presently Yuzka came in and, soon after, Vavrek's wife, and several other neighbours; for already the news had been spread abroad that a stranger had come to Boryna's hut.

But he continued warming himself, paying no attention to the people or their whispers and remarks. When the water in the pot boiled, he took some tea out of a piece of paper, poured the tea in, took a white mug down from the shelf, and drank the tea thus made, nibbling at a lump of sugar the while, and walking about the room, examining the pieces of furniture, or standing in the midst and eyeing the people with such sharp glances that they felt confused.

"Who made these?" he asked, pointing to the wafer "globes" that dangled from the ceiling.

"I did!" Yuzka sang out, turning very red.

He resumed his walk, Lapa following him step by step.

"And who did these paintings?" he inquired, stopping before a few of the cut-out figures that were on the picture-frames and the walls.

"They are not painted, but cut out of paper."

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed.

"I do, for I cut them out myself."

"And did you invent them?"

"Of course, but every child here can do as much."

He said nothing further, poured out some more tea, sat down by the fire again, and a pretty long silence ensued. The folk slunk away; night was coming on, and the storm had abated. At times an angry gust would still rush by, but at rarer intervals and with less fury, like a bird that a long flight has worn out.

At length, Yagna put her distaff aside, and began to prepare supper.

"Was one James Soha ever in your service?"

"Is it Kuba you mean?—Aye, he was, but he died last autumn, poor man!"

"Your parish priest has told me so.—Lord God! I have been seeking him for ever so long in all the villages around, and find him dead!"

"Have you sought for our Kuba?" cried Vitek, greatly

touched. "Then ye are surely brother to the Squire of Vola."

"How do you know that?"

"People have often told me his brother was back from a far-off land, and seeking a certain Kuba in all the countryside: but no one could tell who that Kuba was."

"Soha was his other name; I learned only to-day that he was dead, and had been in your service."

"Yes," Vitek sobbed; "he was shot, and died—died of loss of blood!"

"Was he long with you?"

"Ever since I can remember."

"An honest fellow, I suppose?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, the whole village will tell you how honest he was: all wept at his funeral, all, even his Reverence, who would take no money for the burying.—He taught me my prayers, and how to use a gun, and was like a father to me. . . . Sometimes, too, he would give me a five-kopek bit.—Religious he was, and a quiet man, a hard worker, and one that his Reverence has praised many a time."

"Is he buried in your churchyard?"

"Where else should he be?" Vitek returned. "I know the place; Ambrose set up a cross there, and Roch wrote about him on it. Even were it covered with snow, I could find it for you."

"Then let's start at once, to get there ere nightfall."

The stranger put his sheepskin on, and stood there in a brown study for a time. A man of many years, somewhat stooping, grey-haired and withered. His rugged face had a clayey tint, with a deep scar in one cheek from a bullet, and another, long and fiery, on his brow. His nose was long, his beard tufted and scanty, his eyes dark, deep-sunk and glowing; a pipe was always in his mouth, and he was always refilling it.—Waking up at last from his reverie, he bethought himself of offering money to Yagna, who put her hands behind her back, and flushed crimson.

"Pray take it: nothing in the world is given for nothing."

"In the world, that may be the fashion," she retorted,

with wounded pride. "Am I a Jewess or a trader, to take money for a little fire and water?"

"Well, God reward your hospitality! Tell your husband that Yacek from Vola has been here: he will remember me. I shall be here again some day, but am now in haste, for night is near. God be with you!"

"And with you also!"

She would have kissed his hand, but he snatched it away, and hurried out of the cabin.

The darkness was coming down slowly over the land. The great gale had gone down, but from the hillocks of drifted snow that lay across the road, there blew a dry powdery dust, like flour shaken out of a cloth. Above, all was now tranquil: huts and gardens came clear and distinct out of the livid blur of the uprising dusk.

The village, lethargic during the blizzard, had started up; the ways were full of passers-by, the gardens of voices; here and there they were clearing away snow from before the huts, or cutting holes in the ice and carrying water from the pond; gates were opening and a few sledges ploughing their way through the snow. Crows—an infallible sign that the weather was about to change—appeared, hopping about the huts.

Mr. Yacek gazed round him with interest, asking at times about the people they met or the huts they passed by, and walked so fast that Vitek could scarcely keep pace with him. Lapa ran on in front, barking gaily.

In front of the church, the snow was piled up in such great masses that it went over the fence completely, and was as high as the boughs of the trees. They were accordingly compelled to go round the priest's dwelling-house, outside of which a troop of urchins were running to and fro, shouting and snow-balling each other. Lapa barked at them; one boy caught it by the neck and threw it into a feathery steamy drift. Vitek rushed to the rescue, but they pelted him so hard, he could scarcely get away; and, having retaliated as best he could, he ran to rejoin Mr. Yacek, who had not waited for him.

With difficulty they plodded through as far as the burying-ground. Here, too, the snow was often as high as a man, and the black arms of the crosses were only just above the surface of the white mounds that covered the graves. The place was somewhat exposed and there was some wind here. Now and then, wafting the powdery snow hither and thither, it hid all things from sight, except the naked trees waving their shattered branches and looming with dark trunks through the cloudy veil. All the fields around were one plain of pure white; and just beyond the churchyard, hard upon a score of people could be seen going along the deeply covered road, bending forward under very heavy burdens that they bore. When the wreaths that hid them now and then were swept away, and the wind fell, women's red petticoats were seen clear and distinct, straggling units on the plain.

"Who are these? Are they returning from some fair?"

"No, they are *komorniki*,[1] and have been to the forest to get firewood."

"What, are they carrying it on their backs?"

"Surely. As they have no horses, their shoulders must bear the load."

"Many such in the village?"

"Not a few. Only the *gospodarze* have land; the others live in lodgings, and go out to work, or take service on farms."

"Do they often go out to fetch firing?"

"The manor allows them to come twice a week with bill-hooks and take as much dry wood as they can break off and carry in their bundles. The *gospodarze* alone have the right to go to the forest with a cart, and use an ax on the trees. . . . We have often and often, Kuba and I, gone there together, and come back with a splendid tree in the cart!

[1] Peasants form two classes: the *gospodarze*, or landowners, who have at least a hut and enclosure of their own; and *komorniki*, or lodgers, who must work even for the lodgings they occupy. These are very poor, and looked down upon by the others.—*Translator's Note.*

Kuba knew well how to fell a hornbeam, and conceal it so amongst the firewood faggots that even the keeper never caught him," he said, not without pride.

"Was he long in pain? Tell me all."

This Vitek did, nothing loath, Mr. Yacek putting some questions to him from time to time, now stopping short, gesticulating and exclaiming aloud. The lad thought his manner strange, could not make out what he meant, and was beginning to feel terror besides: it was getting so dark; the whole churchyard looked as though clad in a huge shroud, and murmuring with eerie voices. So he ran on in front and, with eyes starting from their sockets, looked about for the cross that marked Kuba's grave. At last he found it, close to the fence, and near the scattered tombs of those slain in the insurrection—"the War"—where he had prayed on All Souls' Day.

"Here it is, and the name, written on the cross: James Soha."—He spelt it out, following every one of the great white letters with his finger. "Yes, Roch wrote that, and Ambrose made the cross."

Mr. Yacek gave him a couple of *złoty*, and bade him run home. So he did, and scampered away, but stopped once to whistle for Lapa, and glance back to see what the stranger was about.

"Lord! The brother to the Squire, kneeling at Kuba's grave!" he ejaculated, stupefied. But night was coming on fast, and the trees, bending down over him, shook their heads in a weird way; so he went back to the village at a run, and by a short cut; only stopping near the church to take breath and look at the money he had safe in his closed fist. The dog caught up with him, and they went back at leisure to the cabin.

Close to the pond he met Antek, returning from his work. The dog rushed to fawn on him, whined with delight and barked, and Antek caressed it kindly.

"Good dog! good dog!—Whence come you, Vitek?"

He told him of all, omitting the money given.

"Come one of these days and see my children."

"Yes, yes; I have made a cart for little Peter, and another funny figure besides."

"Do not forget to bring them.—And here is something for yourself."

"I'll come this very day, but first I must see if master is home yet."

"Is he out?" Antek inquired, with poorly assumed indifference.

"At the miller's, taking counsel with the Squire and a few more."

"Mistress at home?" he asked, lowering his voice.

"Aye: busy at work. I'll just look in there and be back."

"Yes, come to us!" he said, and would have made more inquiries; but, though it was late, people were still about; moreover, the boy, a feather-headed fellow, might blab and let things out. So he walked on swiftly, looking round when near the church to see if he was watched, and then turned aside, taking a path that ran by the granaries. Vitek meanwhile made for the cabin.

Boryna had not come yet: the family room was in shadow, save for the brands which glowed dully on the hearth. Yagna was preparing the evening meal, and in evil humour; for Yuzka had gone off again somewhere, and there was so much to do, one did not know what to begin first. She gave no heed to what Vitek said, until he mentioned Antek's name; it arrested her attention and she paused in her work.

"Tell no one that he gave you money!"

"Since mistress forbids me, I'll not breathe a word of it!"

"Here are five kopeks more, for you to remember.—Did he go home?"

Without waiting for an answer, she suddenly ran out into the porch, calling for Pete, whilst she peered into the orchard and court-yard, with searching, yet frightened glances. She even went out to look beyond the shed and about the haystack. No one was there. . . . This quieted her, but also tried her patience. She rated Yuzka for not having given the cows their drink, and for her continual

idleness; to which the little girl, being bold and fierce and by no means tongue-tied, was not slow to answer back. And they had a quarrel, each saying very sharp things.

"Gabble, gabble your fill! your father is coming, and his strap will silence you!" she threatened her, lighting the lamp, and taking up her spinning again. Yuzka went on grumbling, but no one replied to her; Yagna had just heard, she thought, someone passing outside the corner window.

"Vitek, look outside; I think that one of our swine has got out of the sty and is in the orchard now."

But he assured her he had driven them all in and made the door fast. Yuzka went to the other side of the hut and brought tubs, Pete helping her, for the cows to drink from; then she ran for the milking-pails.

"I myself shall milk them; after so much labour, ye need rest."

"Yes, milk them, do! Once more ye will leave the udders half full!" Yuzka snapped at her.

"Hold your peace, you had best!" she cried in a fury, as she put her clogs on, tucked up her petticoat, and went to the cow-shed with a couple of pails.

Night had fallen, the wind was hushed, the white snow-mist settling down. But the sky above hung black, starless, packed close with small low-lying clouds; the fields loomed a dark grey; an oppressive lull prevailed everywhere. Not a voice was heard in the village, nor any sound but the hammers, beating, clinking, clinking, beating, on the anvil in the forge.

In the byre it was close and dark; the kine were drinking the water, and noisily licking, with muffled gurgles, the bottom of the tubs as they emptied them.

Yagna groped and found the milking-stool, sat down by the first cow in the row, felt her udder, wiped it clean, and, propping her head against the animal's flanks, began her work.

The milk spurted rhythmically into the resounding pail; the hoofs of the horses pawed in the adjoining stable; from

the cabin, muffled, yet audible, came the noise of Yuzka's chattering.

"Aye, she babbles and babbles, but does not peel the potatoes!" Yagna muttered, bending a most attentive ear; for now the snow outside was crackling under—it seemed to her—the steps of someone coming from the shed. . . . They stopped . . . all was still again . . . they approached —the snow crackled louder.—Turning her head toward the glimmering outlines of the open door, she saw a figure dimly silhouetted there.

"Pete!" she cried.

"Hush, Yagna, hush!"

"Antek!"

Motionless, palsy-stricken at the sight and words, she could not articulate one syllable, nor even think. Instinctively she went on milking, but the milk squirted on to her petticoat, or fell on the ground. A fit of fever had seized upon her; a gust, as it were, of fiery flame swept through all her being, flashing lightnings before her eyes, tearing at her heart-strings with delicious pain. And then something caught her and throttled her so, she had like to fall dead on the spot.

"Ever since Yule-tide," he whispered, "I have been as a watch-dog, waiting and watching for you, there, by the haystack . . . and you did not come once."

That voice of his! Strangled, passionate, flaming with love, it overwhelmed her with the might of its clamorous outcry to her heart, and of the sweet irresistible fire it bore. He stood facing her, leaning (as she could feel) against the cow's flank, bending down and gazing upon her—so near that she could feel his hot breath upon her brow.

"Do not fear me, Yagna. No one has seen; fear nothing . . . I could bear it no longer, it was impossible: day and night and always, you stand before mine eyes, Yagna.—Will you not say one word?"

"What—what can I say?" she faltered tearfully.

Then they both were silent. Emotion made them mute, and the very closeness of one to the other, the very solitude

in common that they had so much desired, now took all power from them, and weighed them down—a burden delightful indeed, but fearful as well. They were irresistibly drawn to each other, and yet it was now so hard to bring out a single word! Their desire was mutual, and yet neither could stretch forth a hand!

The cow, swishing her tail as she drank, struck him more than once in the face, until he caught it in a firm grasp. Then he bent down over Yagna still lower, and whispered again:

"Sleep I cannot—nor eat—nor do aught without you, O Yagna!"

"Things are not easy for me either."

"Yagna! did you ever think of me at all?"

"Was I able not to think? You arise in my thoughts always . . . I know no longer what to do.—Is it true that ye did smite Matthew?"

"It is. He lied, slandering you: I have stopped his mouth. . . . And I will deal likewise with anyone who does so."

The cabin-door slammed: someone came out into the yard at a run, straight for the cow-house. Antek had but just time to leap the manger and crouch there.

"Yuzka ordered me to take the tubs back; we must get the food ready for the swine," said Vitek.

"Take—take them all!" she answered, huskily.

"Nay; Lysula has not finished hers yet; I shall return for it." He hurried away, and they heard him bang the house-door.

Antek emerged from his hiding-place.

"He is coming back, that imp! I shall go to the hay-stack and wait. . . . Will you come to me, Yagna?"

"I fear . . ."

"Come, oh, come . . . if but for an hour or so.—I shall wait for you," he entreated.

He came behind her, still sitting beside the cow, threw an arm round her breast in a strong embrace, bent her head back and kissed her mouth with so powerful an intake of

the breath, that she herself could not breathe. Her arms fell to her sides, the pail rolled along the ground. But, straining up towards him, she kissed him back with such wild vehemence that they both closed as in a death-grapple; each fell into the other's arms; and so they remained awhile locked in that one mad, frenzied, delirious kiss.

At last he tore himself away, and slunk out of the byre.

She would now have sprung after him, but he was on the threshold and vanished like a shadow into the night. Yet still she could hear his muffled whisper, and it wrought on her senses with such fiery and commanding power that she looked around, astounded to see him no more. No, he was not there—only the kine, chewing the cud and whisking their tails. She looked out into the yard, where—beyond that threshold—reigned night impenetrable, and silence was lord, save where the forge-hammers beat and clinked afar.—But he *had* been there, had stood by her side, had hugged, had kissed her. Her lips were yet burning, the flame was running through her still, and an unuttered shout of gladness echoed within her heart.—"Antek!" she cried aloud; and the sound of her own voice brought her partly back to her senses.—She set to milking as fast as she could, but was so dazed that she more than once sought the udder between the beast's forelegs, and was so beside herself with gladness that she never knew her face was wet with tears till, as she returned to the cabin, the cold air blew on her cheeks. She brought the milk, but forgot to strain it out, and ran round to the other side of the hut under the impression that she had something urgent to do. . . . What it was, she could not remember: the one thought that filled her mind was that Antek waited for her by the hayrick. She took a few steps about the room, threw her apron over her head . . . and went out.

Very quickly did she round the hut, gliding along outside the windows, to the narrow passage between orchard and shed, which was nearly roofed over with drooping snow-laden branches that bent so low, she had to stoop down as she passed.

Antek awaited her by the stile; he leaped forward, ravenous as a wolf, and half carried, half dragged her to the rick near the roadside.

But that day they were doomed to disappointment. They had scarce got into the rick and joined lips in a kiss, when, stern and loud, Boryna's voice resounded.

"Yagna! Yagna!"

They sprang apart, as if struck with lightning. Antek darted away, and ran crouching along the fence; Yagna hastened back to the court-yard. The boughs had torn her apron off her head, and she was covered all over with snow; but this she did not remark. She rubbed her face with snow, took up an armful of firewood from the shed, and walked deliberately into the cabin.

Old Boryna eyed her askance and somewhat strangely.

"I went to see about Sivula; she is lying down and lowing."

"But where have ye got covered with so much snow?"

"Where?—Oh, there's a lot of it hanging like beards down from the eaves; if you do but touch them, down they come!" She gave the explanation jauntily, but turned her face away from the fire, lest he should see her flaming cheeks.

But she could not hoodwink Boryna. Without looking her straight in the face, he could perceive very well that she was blushing crimson, and that her eyes glowed feverishly. A sort of vague uncertain suspicion crept into his mind, and his jealousy snarled and crouched within him, like a dog ready to bite. He pondered and thought very long, and at last concluded that Matthew must have met her and pushed her against the fence.

Nastka coming in just then, he thought he would get her to speak.

"Ah! What have I heard?—Your Matthew is well and up by now, as it seems?"

"Well and up, indeed? Alas!"

"Someone told me he had met him in the village this evening."

"'Tis all mere talk. Matthew can hardly move, certainly not rise from his bed. He spits no more blood, though; Ambrose cupped him to-day, and prepared him a drink—lard melted in strong vodka—and they are both taking the medicine together so heartily that one can hear their songs from the road!"

The old man put no more questions, but remained suspicious.

Yagna, tired of the moody silence, and abashed by his fixed prying stare, related to him every detail of Mr. Yacek's visit.

He was greatly amazed; and, at a loss to conceive what it meant, he took no small pains to find out, pondering every word. He finally decided that the Squire had sent Mr. Yacek to make sure what the Lipka folk thought about the matter of the clearing.

"But he never so much as asked one word about the forest!"

"When such a one begins, he leads you on and on, as with a rope, and you know neither when nor how, but you tell him all. Well do I know that brood of manor-folk!"

"He asked only about Kuba and the figures stuck upon the wall."

"'To find the road, he walks along a side-path.' Yes, in all this there is some trick or other of the manor-folk. What? the brother of the Squire troubling about Kuba? 'Tis true, this Yacek is, they say, not quite sound of mind —always wandering about the villages, playing his violin where holy figures stand, and talking senseless talk.—Did he say he would come again?"

"He did, and asked about you."

"Well, well, this is beyond me."

"And had you a talk with the Squire?" she asked him pleasantly, wishing to turn his mind away from what had just occurred.

He winced, as though stung in some most tender part.

"No. I was at Simon's." And he said no more.

So they sat together in gloomy silence until supper-time,

when Roch came in. He sat down by the fire, according to custom, but would not eat. When they had done, he said, in a low tone:

"I have not come here for myself. They tell me, the Squire is deeply offended with the Lipka folk and will not employ one peasant of the village to hew down his trees. I have come to ask if this is the truth."

"In God's name, my man, how should I know? It is news to me!"

"But a council was held at the miller's to-day; the news has come thence."

"The Voyt, the miller, and the smith were there: not I."

"How so? They tell me that the Squire was here to-day to see you, and you went out with him."

"I have not seen him, and I speak the truth: believe me or not, as you choose."

But how this truth had stung him, and the fact that he had been slighted had stung him, he did not say.

The very thought exasperated him; he held his tongue nevertheless, ruminating over the bitter grievance, and controlling himself with a great effort, lest Roch should guess at what he felt.

How now? He had been waiting, *he!* and they had held their council, and left him out of it! That he would not pass over.—A nobody in their eyes, he would show he was somebody in the village. . . . It was the miller's doing: he had made a fortune by wronging the people, and was now above everyone. That cheat! of whom he knew enough to send the fellow to prison! . . . And the Voyt, forsooth! one fit rather to feed cattle than command his betters—a vile drunkard, whose office, if they only elected him, Ambrose might take, and fill it as well as he! . . . The blacksmith too, his pestilential son-in-law! Let the brute but come again to Boryna's cabin! . . . And then the Squire —that wolf, always prowling and sniffing round to snatch what he could from the people! A noble, dwelling on the peasants' lands, selling the peasants' forests, living but by the peasants' sufferance; and he durst come there to plot

against them! Could not the wretch understand that a flail would strike as hard on a noble's back as on anyone else's?—However, he let none of these thoughts escape him in words. They pained him exceedingly, they tortured him; but that was his business and no one else's. And, remembering presently that such silent brooding in the presence of a guest was unseemly, he rose and said:

"Ye bring strange news; but if the Squire be resolved and will not change his mind, I see no means of forcing him."

"True; yet if some honourable man were to set before him the harm the people would suffer thereby, he might decide otherwise."

"I," Boryna exclaimed tartly, "will by no means intercede!"

"But consider: there are a score of *Komorniki* here, all eager for work to do. Ye know them, and know how severe this winter is. Some have their stock of potatoes frozen, and are out of work. Ere spring comes, the misery among them will be frightful. Even now, many families have only once a day warm food to eat. They all reckoned that, when the Squire had his trees in Vilche Doly felled, there would be work enough for everyone. And now it is said that he has vowed he would not take one man from Lipka, being angered because they brought a complaint against him to the commissioner."

"That I signed myself; and I will stand by it. He shall not fell one sapling without our consent."

"If so, then he will perchance not fell any trees."

"None, at least, on our land."

"But," Roch faltered, "what will become of those poor men?"

"I cannot help their fate, nor give up our rights that they may work for him. I may stand up to defend others from wrong; but when I am wronged, who will be on my side? My dog, perhaps?"

"Then I see ye are not a friend of the manor."

"A friend of myself—and of justice. Of naught besides.

And I have other matters to think upon. If Voytek or Bartek has no food to eat—that is the priest's affair, not mine! With the best will, I cannot alone provide for all."

"But help to provide . . . and help not a little," Roch replied, sadly.

"Try carrying water in a sieve: how much will ye bring in? 'Tis even so with poverty.—And to me it seems a divine ordinance that some should have possessions, and others only the air they breathe."

Roch bowed his head and went out, much grieved. He had expected less harshness towards human sufferings from Boryna. The latter saw him to the gate, and—as customary with him—went round to give a last look at the cows and horses ere going to bed.

Yagna, murmuring her evening prayer, was beating up the contents of the feather-bed she was making, when Matthias, coming in, cast a piece of cloth at her feet.

"Ye lost your apron: I found it by the stile!" he said, very quietly, but with such harsh emphasis and a look so keen and searching that she was petrified with fear, and it was some seconds before she could stammer out some words to explain things.

"'Twas . . . 'twas that Lapa. . . . Mischievous brute! . . . always making off with something . . . took my clogs to his kennel the other day.—Always up to some mischief!"

"Lapa?—I see.—Aye, aye," he muttered with grim irony, positive that she had lied to him.

CHAPTER VII

ON Twelfth Night, which that year fell on a Monday, the folk were slowly filing out of church, even before Vespers were over. For they heard from the tavern the music and singing, and made their way towards the inviting sounds. It was now that, for the first time since Advent, music was permitted; now, too, that Margaret Klemba and Vincent Soha celebrated their betrothal. The latter, though bearing the same name as the deceased Kuba, denied any relationship with him, being of those who pride themselves on their acres alone.

Also, it was whispered that Staho Ploshka (who had since the potato-harvest been making up to Ulisia, the Soltys' daughter) would surely that evening come to the point and settle everything with her father over a bottle. The latter was known to have objected to the match, not wishing for a son-in-law such a quarrelsome fellow, fickle besides, never on good terms with his parents, and demanding either four whole acres of land or two thousand *złoty* in cash and a couple of cows into the bargain, as Ulisia's dowry.

That day, too, was the christening at the Voyt's; and though the festivities were to be held at home, most who knew him expected that, as soon as the company should be in convivial mood, he would adjourn to the tavern and stand them drinks there all round.

Besides these attractions, there were also greater and more serious matters, which concerned all the people equally.

They had, as it happened, learned after High Mass from the people of the other hamlets that the Squire had already engaged all the hands he needed at the clearing: ten from Rudka, from Modlitsa fifteen, about eight from Debitsa,

and of the "nobility" of Rzepki[1] hard upon a score; from Lipka, not one single man. It was a fact, for the forester had been at High Mass, and had told them so.

The poor were in consternation.

There were indeed in Lipka a great many wealthy families. And there were others, too, not so well off, but to whom this mode of earning money did not appeal. And others, again, though in distress, would never own to it, in order to keep up appearances and friendly relations with the wealthy men with whom they invariably held.—But there were also the *Komorniki,* and such as possessed only a hovel to live in. Of these, some worked on the farmers' threshing-floors, some wielded axes at the saw-mill, some did any work that came to hand, and (with the help of the Lord) scraped together enough to live upon. And, besides these, there were still five families that could get no work at all in the village: these had been looking forward to tide the winter over by work done on the clearing.

What were they to do now?

The winter was terrible. Few of them had any savings; some had even finished their stock of potatoes, and starvation was staring them in the face. They had to wait till spring, with no help in sight: small wonder, then, that they were sorely troubled in mind. They assembled in their huts to discuss matters, and in the end came to Klemba in a body, begging him to go with them to his Reverence, and seek his advice. Klemba excused himself, pretexting his daughter's betrothal. Others whom they tried shirked the troublesome duty, wriggling out of it like eels, and caring only for themselves and their own profit. This enraged Bartek (him of the saw-mill), who, though he had work, was always on the side of the poor. He therefore took with him Philip, who

[1] Here and there in Poland, one finds villages whose inhabitants hold aloof from the other peasants, and keep strictly to themselves; types very different from the others; haughty, reserved, and generally very poor. In old days, their forefathers were ennobled and grants of land were made to them for distinguished military service; and these are the remnants of their posterity.—*Translator's Note.*

lived over the water, Staho (old Bylitsa's son-in-law), and Bartek Koziol and Valek the Wry-mouthed: with these four he went to beg his Reverence to plead for them with the Squire.

They were closeted with him a considerable time, and only after Vespers did Ambrose hurry to tell Kobus that they were in conference with the priest, and would come over to the tavern.

Evening was falling meanwhile; the last fires of sundown were burnt out in the west, save for a few grey ashes that glimmered red like dying brands; and the country-side was slowly being wrapped in the mantle of the night. No moon was up as yet, but from the hard-frozen snow some chill icy gleams were reflected, making things appear as if shrouded in a winding-sheet. Stars peeped forth from the overhanging darkness—specks that swelled and shrank tremulously in the deep space, and shone bright with sparkling reflections on the snow. And the frost grew so bitter that men's ears tingled and the slightest noise seemed to echo over all the land.

But in the huts the fires blazed, and folk went busily about their evening duties: when in the yard and the enclosures, they bustled with furious haste, the frost burning their faces like a hot iron and strangling the very breath within them; but all was very quiet in the streets and lanes.

Not in the tavern, however. Here the musicians made a joyful noise, ever louder and louder. People were there, come from almost every hut: some to look about them, some (whom neither betrothals nor serious affairs interested) allured by the scent of the vodka. Women to whom solitude at home was irksome, and girls fond of romping with boys and hearing the band play, had slipped away stealthily before the gloaming, ostensibly to take the men home with them; but they stayed on themselves. Children too, especially boys in their teens, had followed their fathers; whistling to one another about the messuages, they had gathered in groups, loitering inside and outside the tavern porch, in spite of the cruel frost which bit them.

The tavern was well crowded. A big fire roared up the

chimney, flooding half the public room with blood-red light. Each man, on entering, stamped to clean his boots on the hearth, warmed his numbed hands, and then went to seek his own set in the throng: no very easy matter, for, notwithstanding the fire and the lamp hung over the bar, it was dark enough in the corners. In one of these the musicians sat, playing only now and then, and not very willingly: the dances had not properly begun yet, though an impatient couple or two were already whirling round and round.

The walls were lined with people, sitting at tables all along them, and in separate companies. But few of these drank much; they conferred together, and looked with a wistful eye on all who came in.

There was most noise about the bar, where Klemba's invited guests and Soha's kinsmen were standing; but even these were for the most part talking, and behaving with great propriety, as was the right thing at betrothals.

Many darted furtive glances towards the window, where about fifteen men of Rzepki were sitting at table; they had come before any, and still kept their places. No one insulted them, but no one showed them goodwill either, except Ambrose, who made friends with them at once, drank much vodka, and told them as strange stories as they could swallow. Close by stood Bartek of the saw-mill, with his friends, telling them what his Reverence had said, and inveighing loudly against the Squire. He was noisily supported by Voytek Kobus, a wiry little man, so fierce that he was all the time banging his fists on the table and boiling over with rage. This he did on purpose, guessing that the Rzepki men there present were going to fell the trees next day. Not one of them, however, took up his provocation, but they talked among themselves as if they had heard nothing.

Nor did any of the *gospodarze* there take it much to heart that his Reverence had been unwilling to plead for them with the Squire. On the contrary, the more noise the others made, the more these avoided them, turning away among the crowd. This was not difficult, the throng being so thick and making so much din that each man could, at his ease and regard-

less of his neighbours, choose the society he preferred. Only Yagustynka passed from group to group, here with a word of mockery, there with a merry jest, or whispering low some bit of gossip—but always attentive to go where bottles passed round and glasses clinked.

After a time, and by slow degrees, the people's fancy turned to merry-making. The noise had by now become an uproar, the glasses jingled oftener, the door opened incessantly to let new guests in. At last the musicians, being well plied with liquor by Klemba, struck up a brilliant mazur; and Soha, with his Margaret, led off, followed by as many couples as cared to dance.

These were not many in number. Most of the folk, seeing the first dancers in the place—Ploshka, Stach, Vahnik, the Voyt's brother, and many more—sitting and talking in nooks and corners, preferred to hold joyous converse together, or to jeer, half aloud, at the "nobility" of Rzepki, to whom Ambrose was constantly paying court.

Then Matthew appeared, leaning on a stick, drawn from his bed for the first time by his longing for society. He at once ordered vodka boiled with honey, took a seat by the fireside, and set to drinking and joking with his acquaintances. Suddenly he stopped. Antek was standing in the doorway; who, seeing him, drew himself up proudly and, after shooting one glance at the man, would have passed on as if he did not exist.

But Matthew exclaimed excitedly:

"Boryna! come hither to me!"

"Come ye yourself, if ye have aught to say," was Antek's curt reply: he thought the other meant to attack him.

"I would; but I cannot walk yet without a stick."

Antek, mistrusting him, passed on with an ominous frown; but Matthew caught him by the arm, and made him sit down at his side.

"Seat yourself here.—You have shamed me before all men; you have beaten me so, they had to call the priest in! But I bear you no grudge, fellow, and come first with words of peace.—Here, drink with me, boy! No man had ever

beaten me, and I thought no man could.—Wondrously strong you are, truly!—To toss up a man like me as a truss of straw . . . good heavens!"

"Ye were ever harrying me as I worked. . . . And then ye let out foul speech: it made me furious, I knew not what I did."

"Yes, you speak true, and I confess it: not from fear, but with a willing mind.—But how ye did clapperclaw me! Why, I lost my best blood, and have many a rib broken. . . . Well, to you, Antek, I drink.—What, man! forgive and let hate die! I, too, forget all . . . as well as my shoulders will let me! . . . But are you indeed stronger than Vavrek of Vola?"

"Did I not, on Indulgence Day, last harvest-time, thrash him so that I hear he is not well yet?"

"Vavrek! They told me that, but I would not believe it. . . . Here, you Jew! Rum! And 'essence' to flavour it this instant, or I trounce you soundly!"

"But . . . ye vaunted of something in public," Antek said, lowering his voice; "surely it was not true?"

"Nay, I spoke out of spite and at random. Nay, how could that be true?"—But, as he made this denial, he held the bottle to the light, looking through, lest Antek should read the truth in his eyes.

They drank once, then once more; then it was Antek's turn to stand treat, and they emptied their glasses anew. And so they sat, quite as brothers, and on such friendly terms that all in the tavern were amazed. Matthew, who had taken more than a drop too much, yelled to the musicians to play faster, stamped and roared with laughter, and then spoke in Antek's ear.

"So much is true: I did long for her to be mine; but she scratched me so, I was like one dragged face down through the brambles. Yes, she preferred you, I know it well; and even had she not, she would never have cared for me. 'Tis hard to lead an ox against its will. And I was sorely, how sorely! stung with jealousy. The girl is wonderfully

fair—none fairer in the world. But how she ever could marry that old man—and to your hurt—I cannot think!"

"To my hurt? Aye, and for my perdition too!" Antek began, but stopped short. Here his memory kindled within him such a flame that he muttered an inaudible oath, and said no more.

"Peace, lest tale-bearers hear you!"

"What have I said?"

"Nothing that I could hear; but others might."

"It is unbearable—my heart is torn asunder!"

"I tell you: while ye can, get the better of it!" he said, cunningly striving to win his confidence little by little.

"Can I do so? Since love, far worse than sickness, burns in the bones, festers in the heart, and fills me with such craving, I can neither eat nor work nor sleep, and would like to dash my brains out to rid me of my life!"

"Oh, I know all about that. Lord, how I once ran after Yagna!—But when love comes, there is one thing to be done: marry, and it will at once pass away and vanish. If one cannot have the wife, why, then, the sweetheart: and immediately desire will be quenched, and love will die. I tell you the truth, and am not without experience," he added, with pride.

"And what," Antek asked, sadly, "what if it shall not pass even then?"

"That," he returned scornfully, "is the lot of none but those that sigh in groves, and lurk round corners, and tremble to hear a petticoat rustle!"

"What you have said is true," Antek replied, in deep thought.

"Come, man, drink to me: my throat is dry even to the bottom thereof.—The foul fiend take all women! Such a one, so weak you could fell her with a breath, will lead the strongest man as a calf led with a rope, rob him of strength and reason, and make him a laughing-stock to all! She-devils they are, every one of them, and the spawn of Satan, I tell you!—Now, drink to me!"

"Here's to you, brother!"

"God bless you!—I say, a fig for all that devil's spawn! . . . But ye know what they are, well enough."

They went on drinking and talking. Antek was somewhat flustered; and never having had one to whom he could tell his sorrow, he now felt a burning desire to make a clean breast of it. And though he refrained and controlled himself, he dropped a significant word or two here and there; these, though he gave no sign, Matthew noted well.

And now the fun in the tavern was growing to its height. The band worked away with might and main. One dance followed another; drink was quaffed at every table; all raised their voices, often in dispute, so that the public room resounded with the hubbub; and the feet of the dancers drummed on the floor like the beating of flails.

Klemba and his party now adjourned to the private room, and there too the noise was no trifle; but Soha continued dancing furiously with his Margaret, and at times went out with her into the open air, with their arms round each other's waists.

Bartek of the saw-mill and his people, who still stood where they had been before, were now at their second bottle, with Voytek Kobus shouting insults into the ears of the Rzepki Folk.

"Nobles in rags and tags, with naught but bundles and bags!"

"With but a couple of kine, the common property of the whole village!" another screamed.

"Long lousy locks warrant well-born wights!"

"See them, the Jews' hirelings!"

"Let them be leashed with the manor hounds! Both scent a good thing from afar!"

"What they scented, they now have got!"

"They come to snatch away the work that is our due!"

"The good-for-nothing vagabonds! They come because the Jews would hire them no more."

To these shouts some added gestures, shaking their fists

and pressing forward in full cry; and they were soon surrounded by a ring of angry peasants in liquor. But they said not a word, and sat close together, with their sticks clenched in their hands, drinking only beer, munching the sausages they had brought with them, and eyeing the peasants with a bold undaunted stare.

A fight would perhaps have taken place, but that Klemba now came upon the scene, soothing, beseeching, explaining matters; and the older men, and Ambrose with them, spoke in the same sense. At last Kobus ceased to taunt them, and the others were taken away to the bar for a drink. The band played a tune, and Ambrose set to telling them the most incredible tales—about the wars, and Napoleon, and Kosciuszko—and funny things that made them almost split their sides with laughter.

And presently Klemba's party poured out of the private room, coming in a body to join in the dance; which increased the uproar to such an extent that no voice could any more be distinguished in the universal clamour.

Heated with liquor, they waxed merrier and yet merrier, the young people capering and footing it lustily, while their elders huddled together where they could, hustled and driven back by the dancers, who whirled round in a constantly expanding circle.

The band played enthusiastically now, and the dances went on with a lively swing, though the partners were so many, there was scarce room to turn; they pushed and shoved one another, laughing and shouting gaily, making the floor groan, and the bar with the glasses and bottles jingle to their tread.

In short, it was a splendid festival, in which everyone was taking his fair share.

Winter was now at its height. Those weary arms that had so long delved the ground, were resting now; those forms once bowed, bowed down no longer: all were equal in freedom and repose, and the blithe thought that each enjoyed his own separate and distinct individuality. Even so in

the forest, the trees that in summer-time present only a confused mass of greenery stand out clearly when the winter snow has fallen and veiled the earth, and each particular tree—be it oak or hornbeam or aspen—is at once recognized.

Just so was it here and now with the village folk.

Antek and Matthew alone remained in their places, sitting side by side, like good friends, and talking in low voices of many a thing. At times one or another of the men would join them, and say a few words. Staho Ploshka came; so did Balcerek, the Voyt's brother, and all those foremost young men in the place who had been bridesmen at Yagna's wedding. They felt at first embarrassed, uncertain whether Antek would not receive them with some sarcastic speech. But he shook hands with all, with friendly looks beaming in his eyes; and they presently came round him, listened to all he said, and were again as friendly as they had been of old, when he was foremost among them all. Yet, remembering that only the day before these very men would have slunk from his way if they had seen him at a distance, he could not repress a bitter smile at times.

"We never see you now! The tavern knows you no more," said Ploshka.

"At work from dawn till night, when can I find time?"

Then they went on to discuss other village topics—their fathers, the lasses, the hard winter weather. Antek spoke little, glancing at the door whenever it opened, in the hope of seeing Yagna coming in. But when Balcerek told them of the meeting held at Klemba's concerning the forest, he roused himself and inquired what they had decided.

"Ah, what indeed? They whined and complained and lamented . . . and decided at last that they ought not to allow it to be felled!"

"Men of straw!" cried Ploshka. "What can be expected of them? They meet, drink vodka, groan, sigh . . . and the outcome of their meeting is as last year's snow. The Squire may safely cut down every tree in the forest."

"That," Matthew put in, curtly, "cannot be allowed."

"Who is to prevent him?" they all asked.

"Who? Why, you!"

"But," said Ploshka, "we are not free to act. Once I spoke—father silenced me. The business was not mine, but theirs, the husbandmen's. I was to let it alone, and blow my own nose. And really, they have the right to speak so. All is in their hands: we have no more say in the matter than the farm-servants."

"And that's unjust."

"The younger generation ought to have a share in the land and the management."

"And our elders to retire on an allowance."

"I," Ploshka exclaimed, "have served in the army, my prime is passing, and yet my father refuses me what is my own!"

"It is time we all had what's ours."

"All here are wronged."

"Antek most of all."

"Let us set matters to rights in Lipka!" said one, in a hoarse voice. This was Simon, Yagna's brother, who had but just come, and was standing behind the others. They eyed him with astonishment, as he pushed forward and spoke hotly of the wrongs he had to suffer. But as he met the young fellows' eyes, he blushed very red, unaccustomed as he was to speak in the presence of many, and also standing as yet somewhat in awe of his mother.

"'Tis Nastka has taught him thus much sense," they laughed. Thereupon Simon said no more, but withdrew to a shady corner; and Gregory Rakoski, the Voyt's brother, though no great speaker and somewhat given to stammering, began to hold forth.

"Our fathers keep the land to themselves, and their children out of it. This is wrong and iniquitous. But the worst is that they manage things foolishly. If they had come to an agreement with the Squire, the question of the forest would have been settled long ago."

"How's that? For every fifteen acres of forest, he offered only two of his land, and we had a right to four."

"A right? That is a question to be decided by the officials."

"Who take the Squire's part."

"Not so. The commissioner himself advised us not to accept two acres: so the Squire will have to offer more," Balcerek observed.

"Hush now," said Matthew; "here comes the smith, and an old man along with him."

They turned and saw in the doorway the smith, who was arm in arm with an old man. Both had been drinking, and they pushed forward, straight on to the bar, where they, however, remained but a short time, the Jew ushering them into the private room.

"They have been feasting at the Voyt's."

"What, was the christening to-day?" Antek inquired.

"Oh, yes," Ploshka explained; "all our elders are there. The Soltys was godfather, and the godmother, Balcerek's wife: Boryna, it seems, was offended and refused."

"But who," Balcerek cried, "is the old man here?"

Gregory enlightened him: "He is Mr. Yacek, brother to the Squire of Vola!"

They all stood up to look at him. Mr. Yacek was pressing forward slowly, evidently seeking someone. At last his eyes met Bartek of the saw-mill, and he went with him to the wall against which the men of Rzepki sat in a row.

"What does the man want here?"

"Oh, he is always wandering about the villages, talking with peasants—sometimes helping them—playing on his violin, teaching the girls to sing songs: he must be a little crazy."

"Pray, Gregory, go on with what you had to say."

"Ah, about the forest?—I was saying that we should not leave the matter in the hands of the old men: they would bungle it."

"Well, but," Antek said with decision, "there is only one thing to be done: if they set about felling our timber, we

must all of us go and drive them away, until such time as the Squire shall come to terms."

"That is just what they said at Klemba's."

"Said, yes: but what can they do? No one will go with them."

"The husbandmen will."

"Not all of them."

"All, if Boryna leads them!"

"Which is doubtful."

"Then," Balcerek cried hotly, "let Antek be our leader!"

The proposal was enthusiastically assented to. But Gregory, having seen something of the world, and having a little book-learning, set to point out to them, like the scholar that he was, that violence would be no remedy; that all would end in court, and with sentences of imprisonment; and that the right thing was for the people to apply to a lawyer from the town.

But no one agreed with what he said; some even jeered at him. This put him in a great rage, and he said:

"Ye complain that your fathers are fools, whilst ye yourselves are as great fools as they, and talk nonsense, all of you, like children at their games."

Someone here said: "See, Boryna has come, with Yagna and some girls."

Antek, who had intended to answer Gregory, left him unanswered at the words.

They had come late, after supper. The old man had long resisted Yuzka's whimperings and Nastka's entreaties, for he wanted Yagna to join with them in begging him. Now, she had said at once, after dinner, that she would go to hear the band play, and he had told her sternly that she should not set her foot out of doors!

She did not ask him a second time, but cried in corners, and slammed doors, and rushed about by fits and starts, in a gusty way. And when they had supper, she would eat nothing, but set about getting ready to go, and taking her best skirt out of the chest to try it on.

What was the man to do? He swore a lot, talked, said

again that he was not going anywhere—and finally he had very humbly to ask her forgiveness and, willy-nilly, go to the tavern.

He entered with a haughty imposing mien, saluting few of those present, for few of his equals were there, most of them being at the Voyt's for the christening. He looked round carefully for his son, but missed him in the crowd.

Antek gazed on Yagna all the time, as she stood by the bar, while the lads crowded round her begging for a dance. She refused them all, but chatted gaily with them, now and then casting a quick glance here and there. Very lovely did she look that night, and they all eyed her with admiration, the fairest amongst all the women. Yet Nastka was there, arrayed in red, like a tall hollyhock; and Veronka Ploshka, like a peony in bloom, stately and self-possessed; and Soha's daughter, a mere chit of a lass, but so slender and lithe and sweet to look upon! and many another strapping well-favoured girl, who pleased the lads—as did Mary Balcerek, divinely tall, shapely with firm white flesh, and the very best dancer in the village; but not one of them, not a single one, could vie with Yagna.

By her beauty, her attire, and her marvellous turquoise eyes, she surpassed them all, as the rose does the hollyhock, the peony or the poppy-flower, making them appear paltry and plain beside it: so was she above and beyond them, every one. And that evening she had dressed herself as for a wedding: had donned a skirt of rich yellow, striped with white and green; and her bodice of deep-blue velvet, embroidered with gold thread, was cut low, disclosing half of her bosom; and on her chemise of fine linen, with dainty frills, frothing and foaming abundantly about her throat and hands, there hung many a necklace of coral and amber and pearl-like beads. And her head was adorned with a silken kerchief of turquoise-blue, with pink spots, the corners of which floated down on to her neck behind.

For this finery and sumptuousness of adornment, the women's tongues wagged against her with bitter reviling. But she cared not a whit for all they said: she had beheld

Antek. Colouring with delight, she turned to her husband, to whom the Jew had said something. He thereupon went over to the private room, and remained there.

This was precisely what Antek had been waiting for. He at once elbowed his way through the throng, and welcomed them with easy familiarity. But Yuzka sullenly turned her back upon him.

"Have ye come for the band, or for Margaret's betrothal?"

"For the band," Yagna replied, in a voice husky with emotion.

They stood for a while side by side, speechless but breathing fast, and casting side-glances at each other. As the dancers jostled them and drove them towards the wall, Simon took possession of Nastka, Yuzka drifted away somewhere or other, and the couple remained alone.

"How I have waited day by day . . . waited for you!" he whispered.

"How could I come? I am watched closely," she answered, with a thrill, for their hands had somehow come together, and they stood at close quarters, hip touching hip. They both turned pale, their eyes gleamed, and within them other and ineffable music was striking up.

"Pray let me go, and stand away a little," she begged; for they were surrounded with people.

He did not reply, but took her round the waist in a firm grasp, pushed the crowd aside, and, entering the circle of dancers, called out to the musicians:

"An obertas, boys, and a first-class one!"

And how they struck it up, and how the bass-viols growled! For well they knew that Antek, when in a good mood, was lavish of drinks and of money.

His comrades and friends all followed his lead—Ploshka, Balcerek, Gregory, and the rest: while Matthew, whose ribs would not let him join them, stamped upon the floor and shouted encouragement.

Dancing recklessly, Antek soon took the place of the foremost couple, and rushed on, faster and faster still, thought of nothing, cared for nothing whatever, for Yagna was

pressing close to him and entreating him tenderly, again and again, the while gasping to find her breath:

"More, Antek! Pray, yet a little more!"

They danced long, very long, stopping only to take breath and drink a glass of beer; then once more they started off, never noticing that folk were watching them, and whispering—or even uttering aloud—their disapproval.

But Antek no longer cared for anything in the world, now that he felt her at his side, and pressed her to himself till she closed—closed with delight—those dear blue eyes of hers: he had forgotten himself completely—forgotten men and the whole world of men. His blood was at boiling-point, and he knew his strength to be waxing within him, bold, invincible, and filling his bosom full of the sense of force. As to Yagna, she was entirely plunged in the oblivion of love. He was carrying her off along with him—a fiery dragon!—and she neither made nor could make resistance; so masterful was he, bearing her on in his strong embrace, that now and again her eyes would be darkened, and she could think of nothing else but the bliss, the unutterable joy of her youth: the blackness of his brows, his unfathomable eyes, and the crimson allurement of his mouth!

And the violins were all the time playing, as in an enchanted dream, a tune as genial as the harvest breeze, a tune that turned the blood into fire, and made the heart to throb with mighty gladness; and the bass-viols rumbled with a quick jerky cadence, forcing the feet of the dancers to accompany their lilt: while the flute warbled as entrancingly as a blackbird in the springtime, and opening the heart so, and filling it with such rapture, that you quivered all over, your brain swam, you breathed no more, you longed to weep, to laugh, cry out, hug, kiss—and fly away somewhere, out, out into the vast world!

So on they danced, till the tavern shook, and the barrels on which the musicians had their stand shook too.

In the circle of dancers there were about fifty couples, swaying from wall to wall. Sometimes the lamp would

burn low or go out quite; and then the brands on the hearth would fling their ruddy blood-red glow on the dim forms that flitted by, so vague that one could in no wise know which they were—men or women. One saw but waving capotes, skirts, ribbons, aprons, flushed faces, bright eyes, and a mad din of clattering, singing and shouting—all mingled together in one whirling, twirling, swirling, calling, bawling, brawling, stamping, tramping, ramping mass!

Of them all, Antek was the most boisterous and the liveliest, beating the floor with noisy heels, wheeling hither and thither like a whirlwind—falling down in homage, so that they thought he had stumbled—up again with a shout or a song for the musicians to take up after him—he passed round and round, a hurricane that scarce any could follow.

For a full hour he continued thus, indefatigably. Others fell out, exhausted; the musicians' hands were weary with playing: he threw them money, urging them to play as fast as he could dance. In the end, he and Yagna were almost the only couple that held out.

The women were loud in their amazement at such behaviour and, while they censured it, expressed their pity for Boryna; which Yuzka overhearing, and moved more by hatred for her stepmother than by her grudge against Antek, went to tell Boryna what was going on. But the latter, deep in matters of village politics with the elders and with his son-in-law, scarcely heard what she said.

"Let them dance: the tavern is surely for that," he said.

She returned, disappointed, but set to watch them carefully. They were then just after a dance, standing at the bar, in company with many lads and lasses. It was a merry moment; for Ambrose, now completely drunk, was telling them such tales that the girls threw their aprons over their heads, and the lads laughed uproariously. And Antek was treating them all round—drinking to them first, pressing them to drink, taking the boys' arms in a friendly squeeze, and putting caramels into all the lasses' bosoms by handfuls —that he might deal likewise by Yagna.

Thus they were all diverting themselves pretty well; all

the company was in the gayest key. Even the "nobility" of Rzepki had left their table, having made it up with the Lipka folk over some glasses. Several of them, too, had offered to dance, and the girls had not refused them: their behaviour was so much more refined, and they asked them with so great courtesy.

Antek's set revelled apart from the others. They were of the younger generation, and of the first people in Lipka. As to him, though he talked with them all, he had no idea what he was talking about—neither knew nor cared: he concealed nothing, and could conceal nothing, for he could not help doing what he did then. But it was all the same to him! He continually whispered in Yagna's ear, pushing her nearer and nearer to the wall; his arm was round her waist, her hand in his; he could scarce restrain himself from kissing her in public. His eyes wandered, with a wild look, a tempest raged in his heart, and he would have dared to do no matter what, reading, as he did, in those turquoise-blue eyes of hers, her admiration and her love. It raised his pride to heights unknown, and he felt himself so exalted that he must needs cry and shout aloud in ecstasy. Then he drank again, and forced Yagna to drink, till her clouded mind no longer knew what had come to pass. Only at times, when the music paused, and there was a lull in the tavern din, did she return a little to her senses, and look around in terrified bewilderment, seeking help—she knew not whence. At such moments, she would even have fled; but he was close by, gazing on her, and the fire in his eyes kindled in her such love that at once she forgot everything.

This went on for a pretty long time. Antek stood drinks to all the company, whom the Jew served very willingly, chalking up every litre twice upon the door.

Their heads were now turning, and they all went to dance together, thinking it might sober them a little; and Antek with Yagna led the dance.

At that moment, out of the private room came Boryna, whom the women, shocked at what was going on, had brought to see. Instantly he understood everything, and

was transported with rage. He buttoned up his capote, seized his fur cap, and pushed on to Yagna. They made way for him, shrinking from the old man's face, pale as death, and his eyes that glared with fury.

"Home!" he commanded in a loud voice, as the couple approached, and tried to seize her arm. But Antek, spinning on his heel, bore her away, so that she could not free herself from him.

And then Boryna, leaping forwards, broke through the ring of dancers, tore her from Antek's arms, and never let her leave his grasp till they were out of the tavern. He had not so much as glanced at his son.

Thereupon the band ceased playing; a sinister silence fell upon them all, and they stood as though petrified. All saw that some awful thing was about to take place; for Antek had gone out after them, pushing the throng aside like sheaves of corn and rushing into the night. But the sudden and intense cold made him giddy; he stumbled over a tree-trunk that lay in front of the house, and into a snow-drift. Rising swiftly, however, he came up with them at the turning of the road by the pond.

"Go your ways and let folk be!" the old man cried, turning upon him.

Yagna ran shrieking into the hut; but Yuzka put a heavy cudgel into her father's hand, screaming:

"Down with that ruffian, dad! down with him!"

"Let her go . . . let her go!" Antek vociferated, quite beside himself, coming on with clenched fists to the attack.

"Off, I say! or, as there's a God in heaven, I kill you like a dog! Off!" the old man cried again, ready to strike a crushing blow. . . . And Antek instinctively shrank back; his arms fell to his sides. A sudden panic had taken hold of him; he shuddered with dread, and let his father go slowly home.

He had no longer even the thought of leaping after him as he went away, but stood trembling, distracted, and casting bewildered looks around. No one was there; the moon shone, the snows sparkled, a sombre whiteness made things

just visible. He could not understand what had taken place, and only came partly to his right mind a little later, when brought back to the tavern by the friends who had come out to render assistance, having heard there had been a fight between him and his father.

The merry-making was all over now, and the people were going to their homes, for it was late. The tavern had now emptied itself, but there were, along the road, a few shouts and cries. No one remained but the folk of Rzepki, who were to spend the night there, and to whom Mr. Yacek was playing such weirdly and wailingly mournful airs that they sighed as they sat listening, elbows on table and arms propping chins. Antek moped all alone in a corner, apart from the others: talk with him was out of the question; for when they spoke, he would not answer. There, then, he sat dazed and stunned, and the Jew reminded him in vain that the house was about to close: he neither made out nor heard what was said. It was only at Hanka's voice, who had been told he had again come to blows with his father, that he roused himself.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"Come home. It is late," she said beseechingly, restraining her tears.

"Go yourself. With you I will not go.—Away, I tell you!" he cried in a threatening voice. Then, on a sudden, moved by some unaccountable impulse, he came close and hissed in her ear: "Were I chained and fettered in a prison cell, I should still be more free than with you beside me—far more!"

Hanka withdrew at once, weeping bitterly.

The night was moonlit and serene. The trees threw long bluish-silvery shadows. The frost nipped very hard, making the fence-hurdles crackle from time to time, and a sort of quiet rustling sound rise up from the scintillating snow. Save for this faint susurration in the still night, all the land lay silent. The villagers slept; no light came from any window, not a dog barked, mill and mill-stream were alike soundless. Antek could just hear—faint like a sound heard

in sleep—the husky voice of Ambrose, singing (according to his wont when drunk) in the middle of the road.

With slow and heavy steps, he plodded round the mill-pond, stopping at times to cast bewildered looks from side to side, and listening with dread to his father's awful words, that were still ringing in his ears. Still, too, did he see those stern, fierce, baleful eyes: they pierced him like a knife! Instinctively he winced before them: terror gripped him by the throat, his heart sank within him, and his hair stood on end. And they blotted out from his thoughts all the impetuosity of erewhile—all his headstrong love and passion—everything but mortal dread, trembling dismay, and a wretched sense of weakness and despair.

After a time he unconsciously set his face homewards. As he went, a pitiful cry, a voice of lamentation, reached him from near the church. Someone just beneath the statue which stood in front of the lich-gate lay on the snow, with arms outstretched as one crucified; but in the shade which fell from the churchyard wall, he could not discern who it was. He stooped down, thinking it was some homeless wanderer, perhaps overtaken by drink. And there, implor-ing the mercy of God, lay Hanka!

"Come home . . . the cold is fearful . . . come, Hanka!" He spoke with entreaty, his soul melting strangely within him. She answered nothing. Then he lifted her up and took her home.

All the way, they were mute. But Hanka wept grievously.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER that Twelfth Night, Boryna's house became like a tomb. No weeping, no clamour, no invectives: but a sinister silence dwelt there, telling of rancour and suppressed resentment.

Everybody in the house was now taciturn, veiled in gloom, living in the continual expectation of some awful thing about to take place, as under a roof that one knows may at any time crash down upon one's head.

Neither on his return to the hut, nor even the next day, did Boryna say a single sharp word to Yagna. Nor did he complain to Dominikova: he kept silence about all that had happened.

But the paroxysm of anger he had felt made him ill: he was unable to rise from his bed, had continual qualms, a stitch in his side, and fits of fever now and then.

"'Tis nothing much; only the liver is inflamed, or perhaps the womb has changed position," was Dominikova's diagnosis, as she rubbed his side with hot oil. He replied nothing, but groaned heavily, staring at the rafters above.

"It was not Yagna's fault, indeed it was not!" she said, speaking low, lest they should hear her from the other room. She felt extreme uneasiness at his saying no word to her about the happenings of the night before.

"Whose then?" he muttered.

"What evil has she done? Ye left her, and went away to drink in the private room; the band played, and all the folk danced in the other. What then? Ought she to have sat alone in a corner? She is a young healthy woman, and needs to be amused. Well, he was urgent, and she danced with him. Could she help it? In the tavern, everyone has the right to choose his dancer. He—that wretch! choose

her, and would not leave her alone . . . all out of spite against you!"

" 'Tis good ye rub me to set me on my legs again; but I will take no lessons from you. I know the truth of the matter quite well."

"Are ye so wise? Then should ye know that a young woman in good health needs some pleasure. She is not a log of wood, neither is she an old dame: she married a man, and a man she must have. Not a decrepit veteran, with whom she can only tell her beads! No, no!"

"Yet ye gave her to me in marriage: wherefore, then?" he asked, with a sneer.

"Wherefore? And who was it came whining like a dog? Was it I who implored you to take her? Did I entice you . . . or did she? Why, she might have wedded anyone, aye, and of the first in Lipka: so many were after her!"

"After her, yes; to wed her, no."

"Yelping cur! May your tongue rot off!"

"Ah! the truth is a stinging nettle to you!"

" 'Tis no truth, but a wicked lie!"

He drew up the blanket over his chest, turned his face to the wall, and answered not one word more to all her heated arguments; only, when she at last burst into tears, he whispered mockingly:

" 'If a woman's tongue fail, she thinks tears will prevail.' "

On the point in discussion, he had come to a strong conviction. Whilst he was laid up, the things he had heard of old against Yagna had all come back to him: he had pondered them well in his mind, gathered them together, and thought them over.—And now such bitter exasperation took hold of him for his inability to quit his bed, that he would toss upon it all day with silent angry curses, following, with the fierce eyes of a falcon, every step that Yagna took. She, pale and drooping, would go about the house like a sleep-walker, looking at him with the wistful eyes of an ill-treated child, and sighing so deeply that he could not but feel some compassion for her—though her sighs inflamed his jealousy still more.

And so things dragged on in the hut till Sunday. She, who by nature was extremely sensitive, could hardly bear it any more, and, like a delicate flower that feels the first touch of frost, began to pine and waste away. Daily she looked worse and worse, could sleep no more, was unable to sit still, and spoiled all she did, her work slipping through her fingers. She lived in perpetual dread besides. The old man still kept his bed, moaning, saying never one word of kindness to her, but fixing his gloomy hostile eyes upon her constantly, until she could no longer support it. Life was a burden. And also she was deeply distressed and anxious at getting no more news from Antek. Since Twelfth Night he had never come, though more than once, in spite of the mortal fear she was prey to, she had repaired to the hay-rick. Of course she durst ask no one for news of him. And by this time she loathed her cabin so heartily that she would several times in the day run out to see her mother. But Dominikova was mostly either visiting patients or in church, and, when at home, had only sour looks and bitter reproaches for her. The lads, too, went about moody and sullen, ever since their mother had taken a flax-swingle to Simon for having spent four whole *złoty* in drink at the tavern on Twelfth Night! To get through the day somehow, Yagna would also look in at the neighbours'; but with them too she felt ill at ease. Without telling her to begone, they let their words drop sparingly, sifting them, so to speak: all were very, very sorry that Boryna had fallen ill, and had much to say against the evil times in which they lived.

Yuzka, too, did all she could to annoy her at every step. And Vitek feared to chatter as he had used to do, now his master was of such grim humour. So no conversation was possible with anyone; she had no solace, no diversion at all, save with Pete of an evening, when he played the violin quietly to her in the stable after his day's work, old Boryna having forbidden him to play in the hut.

The winter, moreover, was so severe with daily frosts and blizzards that she often could not go out at all.

But when Saturday came round, Boryna, though not yet quite well, dragged himself out of bed, put on warm clothes against the intense cold, and ventured out.

He called at several huts, ostensibly to warm himself, or to talk of business, and now chatted willingly with some that he would formerly have passed by without a word. He always managed to bring the conversation round to the tavern incident, giving the whole affair a comical turn: he had, he said, been most ridiculously tipsy that night.

Wondering, they agreed with him, nodding sagacious heads; but they were not taken in, all the same. They knew too well that headstrong pride of his, for which he would let himself be roasted alive without uttering a cry.

They quite understood that he came on purpose to give the lie to any malicious tales that might have been circulated.

Old Simon, the Soltys, even told him as much quite frankly, as his custom was:

"'Fiddle-de-dee, fiddle-de-dee!—One fable and two make three.' Gossip is like fire: ye shall not quench it with your hands—only burn them.—Let me repeat to you what I said before your wedding: 'He that takes for a wife one that might be his daughter, for his pains gets a fiend who will scorn holy water.'"

He went home, offended. Yagna, thinking all was over now he had got up, felt relieved, tried to talk and look sweet and be loving and joke with him as before. But he met her advances with so crushing a word that she shuddered to hear it; and no change in him took place with time. He no longer caressed or petted her at all, nor anticipated her wishes, nor cared to win her smiles. If anything was in disorder, he would scold her and drive her to work like a common servant-girl.

And thenceforward he took everything in hand again, looked after all by himself, and saw to everything with his own eyes. For days together, after his recovery, he threshed corn with Pete, and winnowed it in the granary, scarcely ever leaving the premises even for an instant. His

evenings, too, he spent at home, mending harnesses, or repairing domestic implements. She could take no step out of doors without his going to look for her; and he went so far as to lock up her Sunday clothes and keep the key in his pocket.

How she suffered, how she suffered! Not content with rating her soundly for the slightest shortcomings, with never a word of praise, he treated her just as if she were not the mistress of his house. It was with Yuzka alone that he took counsel about what was to be done, explaining what she did not understand, and ordering her to have an eye to everything. For days together, she did nothing but spin at home, almost distracted. She went to complain to her mother, who set herself to plead for her, but in vain.

"She was mistress," Boryna replied, "and did whatever she pleased, and lacked naught. But she has failed to act up to her position: let her now try something else! And, hark ye! tell her that, so long as I can move my limbs, I will defend what is mine, and not suffer myself to be a laughing-stock, or branded with the name of cuckold! Let her bear that in mind!"

"But, good heavens, man! she has done you no injury whatever!"

"Oh, if she had, I should speak and act otherwise! It is enough for me that she has had to do with Antek!"

"Why, 'twas at the tavern . . . in a dance . . . in the presence of everyone!"

"Oho! Only at the tavern? Indeed?" For he shrewdly guessed that at the time when he found her apron, she had been out to meet Antek.

No, he was not to be talked over. His faith in her was gone, and his mind quite made up about her. At last:

"I am," he said, "a kind-hearted and a good-natured man: all know that. . . . But 'strike me a blow with a whip, I at once hit back with a cudgel!' "

"Hit the guilty, all right: but beware of hitting wrong. Every wrong cries out for vengeance."

"When I defend my right, I do no wrong."

"Aye, but find out betimes how far your right extends."

"Is this a threat?"

"I say what I think. Ye are too self-confident: take heed. 'Who to another gives an evil name, himself deserves the same.'"

"I have enough of all your proverbs and your lectures!" Boryna angrily rejoined.

Seeing the man's stubbornness, Dominikova gave up the attempt, and did not try again. She hoped the storm would blow over and things take a better turn; but he did not for an instant swerve from the line he had taken up; he never wavered in his severity, and even tasted a grim pleasure in it. Sometimes, indeed, hearing Yagna weep of nights, he instinctively started up to go to her side—but, remembering in time, would walk to the window and look out.

A couple of weeks elapsed in this way, without any change. Yagna was wearied out, melancholy, and so wretched-looking that she could scarcely bear to be seen by people; she was ashamed before the whole village, for everyone knew what was going on at Boryna's.

This cast a deep and mournful shadow on his home, and it became the abode of apprehension and of silence.

Few people, it is true, came to call upon them. The Voyt, offended at Boryna's refusal to come to his child's christening, no longer darkened his door. Now and then, Dominikova's sons looked in; Nastka came with her distaff, but chiefly to see Yuzka or meet Simon. Roch, too, now and again showed himself there, but never for a long visit, seeing such sullen gloomy faces.

The smith alone came every evening, and for a long stay, each time embittering the old man against Yagna as much as he could: for he had again got into Boryna's good graces. Yagustynka, besides, dropped in frequently, enjoying their quarrels, and adding fuel to the fire with great relish. Dominikova, present daily, daily preached to Yagna the duty of winning her husband back by submission and humility.

It was of no use. Yagna could not humble herself; for

her life, she could not. On the contrary, she felt more resentful every day, more inclined to revolt against his rule. Yagustynka did a good deal to make this inclination stronger. She said to her one day:

"O Yagna, I do grieve for you—aye, as though you were my own daughter! That hound, to ill-treat you so! and you bear it all like a lamb! Another woman would not behave in that wise. Oh, no!"

"And how then?" She put the question with some curiosity, having more than enough of the present state of things.

"You will not overcome evil with good, but only make the evil worse. He uses you as a common wench, and ye let him. He has locked up your things, they say; he dogs every one of your footsteps, and never gives you one word of comfort; and you, what do you do? Sigh, moan, and wait for Heaven to set matters right. Ah, but Heaven helps those that help themselves! Were I in your place, I know well what I should do. First, I should flog Yuzka till she gave up meddling with the household. Are ye not the mistress here?—Then, I would not yield in aught to the goodman. Will he have war? Then let him have war till he is sick of it. Aye, aye! Let him but get the upper hand, and he will soon come to beating you . . . and how far he will go afterwards I cannot tell."

"But first of all"—here she lowered her voice and spoke in her ear—"let him be as a calf weaned from its mother. Let him perforce keep himself to himself, and be like a dog left outside on the threshold. Ye will soon see how much milder and better-behaved he will grow."

Yagna turned aside to hide her scarlet blushes.

"What, ashamed? Foolish girl! Why, all do likewise, and will ever do so: this is no new discovery of mine. A dog follows a piece of bacon: even so, and more so, does a petticoat allure a man! Of an old man, this is still truer, he being more self-indulgent, and less likely to find comfort elsewhere.—Do as I say, and ye will thank me soon.—And as to what folk say of you and Antek, do not take it to

heart; were you white as driven snow, they still would think you sooty. But it is the way of the world: all rise against the meek, if they but crook their finger; and who is proud and determined may do what the devil he pleases, no one will dare to raise his voice against him, but all will fawn upon him like curs. The world belongs to the strong, the dauntless, the resolute.—Oh, they slandered me not a little in my time . . . and your mother as well.—About Florek . . . a matter well known to all."

"Let my mother be!"

"Ah, well! may she ever remain a saint in your eyes. . . . We all must needs hold someone for a saint."

She went on with these instructions. Little by little, and unasked, she began to tell her things about Antek—things of her own invention, but interesting. Yagna listened with greedy ears, though careful not to betray herself in any wise. But she thought well all day of the advice given; and in the evening, when the smith, and Roch, and Nastka were present, she said to her husband:

"Hand me the key of my chest: I must air my things."

He was ashamed to refuse, with Nastka tittering at his side; but after she had put the clothes back, he stretched out his hand for the key.

"In the chest there are only my own garments: I am quite able to keep the key by myself!" she boldly replied.

That evening marked the commencement of a new state of things in the cabin: life there became a hell. As stubborn as the old man was obstinate, to any rebuke of his she replied in a voice that might be heard out in the road. She pounced upon Yuzka wherever and whenever she could, and more than once inflicted so severe a beating on her that the girl ran crying to complain to her father. And complaints were of no avail: she persecuted her still more fiercely afterwards, when Yuzka had not obeyed. Her evenings she decided to spend on the other side of the passage, leaving her husband alone, and ordering Pete to come there and play to her, and accompany the ditties she would sing till late at night. And on Sundays, dressed in her very best clothes, she

went to church without waiting for Boryna, and talked to the farm-servants on the way.

Wondering at this transformation, he raged and fumed, but did his best to withhold the knowledge of it from the village. She was not to be put down; and, little by little, he began to overlook her whims in order to have a quiet life.

"Why, good dame," he once exclaimed to Yagustynka, "she was even as a lamb before—the gentlest of ewe-lambs; and behold, she butts now like a ram!"

"She has waxed fat, and is too full of fodder!" Yagustynka replied with indignation; she always took the part of anyone that asked her advice. "But let me tell you, ye should drive out these humours of hers with a stick betimes, lest ye may not prevail later, even with a club!"

"Such was never the custom of the Borynas!" he returned, in a lofty way.

"Yet methinks," she spitefully remarked, "that even the Borynas will have to come to that!"

A few days later, just after Candlemas, Ambrose came in the afternoon to tell them the priest would come the next day for the *Kolendy*[1] visit.

All the morning they were busily engaged in a general cleaning. The old man, to avoid hearing Yagna continually abuse and upbraid Yuzka for all she did, had gone out to sweep the snow about the premises. The rooms were given fresh air, the walls cleared of cobwebs; Yuzka strewed the porch and passage with yellow sand, and they all arrayed themselves in their very best attire; for the priest was now not far off, officiating at neighbour Balcerek's.

Presently his sledge stood outside the porch; and he, with his surplice over his fur, and accompanied by two of the organist's sons in choir-boys' robes, entered the cabin. Before him, Boryna carried a deep plate, full of holy water. He said some Latin prayers, sprinkled the rooms, and then went out to bless the farm-buildings and all the man's pos-

[1] *Kolendy*. An annual ceremony of blessing the house and farm and the live stock.—*Translator's Note.*

sessions, passing round and saying the sacred words aloud, the organist's boys walking on either side of him, singing Christmas carols, and untiringly ringing and swinging their little jingling bells. Boryna carried the holy water before; the others walked behind, in procession.

All being over, he returned to the cabin to rest; and while Boryna, aided by Pete, was putting fifty litres of oats, and half as many of pease, in the priest's sledge, he was listening to Yuzka's and Vitek's prayers, which they repeated to him in the cabin.

They knew them perfectly. Who had taught them? he wondered.

"Kuba taught me my prayers; Roch, my catechism and by primer!" the lad answered boldly. The priest patted him on the head, and gave each of them a couple of pictures. Then he told them to obey their elders, never neglect prayer, and beware of sin. "For Satan, whithersoever we go, is on the watch, ready to drag us down to hell." Then, raising his voice, he concluded with a solemn warning:

"And this I say unto you, that nothing, no, nothing is hidden from the eye of the just God. Beware therefore of the day of judgment and of doom: repent ye, and mend your ways whilst it is yet time!"

The two children burst into tears, feeling as at church during a sermon. And Yagna's heart throbbed with dread, and a deep blush overspread her face; she knew those words were meant for her, and as soon as Matthias returned she left the room, without daring to raise her eyes to the priest.

"I should like to have a talk with you, Matthias," he said, when they were alone together. Motioning him to a seat by his side, he cleared his throat, offered him snuff, used a beautifully scented pocket-handkerchief, and, making his finger-joints crack one after another, began quietly:

"I have heard—yes, Matthias, I have heard of what took place in the tavern not long ago."

"Aye, indeed," the old farmer returned, with a pained look; "it was public enough, to be sure."

"Do not go to the tavern, and do not take your womenfolk thither: how often have I forbidden it! I wear my lungs out in beseeching you. . . . No use!—Well, ye have received what you deserved.—Nevertheless, I thank God most heartily that in all this there has been no very grievous sin. I repeat: no grievous sin."

"None?" Boryna's face brightened: he did not distrust the priest.

"But I have also been told that you are punishing your wife very severely for what has happened. This is not just, and injustice is a sin. A sin."

"How's that? I am only holding her in with a tighter hand. I am only . . ."

Here the priest interrupted him, saying excitedly: "Antek, not she, was at fault! It was to spite you that he forced her to dance with him; evidently he wanted a scene. A scene." Of this he felt quite sure: Dominikova, in whom he reposed much confidence, had given him her account of things.—"What else had I to say to you?—Ah, yes! Your filly wanders loose about the stable. You must tie her up, else one of the horses may injure her with a kick. Last year I had my mare lamed that way. . . . Whose is her sire?"

"The miller's."

"I was sure of it—knew it by her colour and the white spot on her forehead.—A fine filly!—But, as to Antek now: you and he should be reconciled: your disagreement is driving that young fellow to evil ways."

"I did not begin the quarrel," Boryna replied with decision, "and I am not going to beg him to end it."

"The advice I give you it is my duty as a priest to give. As to taking it, follow what your own conscience says. Only mark this well: he is going to his destruction, and you let him go. He drinks continually in the tavern, is a firebrand among the young men, incites them to revolt against their elders, and—as I hear—is plotting harm to the manor folk."

"Of that I knew nothing."

"One tainted sheep infects the flock. And these plots against the manor may result in great evil to the village people." But on this point Boryna was doggedly mute; so the priest changed the subject, and said finally:

"Union, my dear friend, is the only thing. Union." He took snuff, put his fur cap on, and added: "Union and brotherly love make the whole world go round. And that is why the manor would willingly come to an agreement with you. The Squire told me as much: he is a good man, and would fain arrive at a neighbourly understanding with everyone . . ."

"When a wolf is your neighbour, you can only come to an understanding with a club or an ax!"

The priest started, shocked at the words, and looked him steadily in the face; but, seeing the cold relentless expression of his eyes and his set lips, turned away hastily, and rubbed his hands, much upset.

"I must away. Allow me to repeat that you ought not to set your wife against you by severe treatment. She is young—flighty, too, as women are—and you should deal with her wisely, and justly as well: be blind to one thing, deaf to another, and overlook a third. Thus ye may avoid unpleasant scenes, which might have most evil consequences. Yes: our Lord has a special blessing for peacemakers. For peacemakers.—Oh! what on earth is this?" he suddenly exclaimed, much startled; for the stork, hitherto standing motionless by the chest, had unexpectedly pecked with all its might at the priest's well-polished boot.

"It's only a stork, that remained here in autumn, with a broken wing, and Vitek took care of it, and nursed it till it got well again. Now it stays in the hut with us, and catches mice as well as any cat could do."

"Really? I never yet saw a tame stork. Curious, most curious!"

He bent down to give Bociek a caress; but this it would have none of, and with curved neck meditated another sly attack on the priest's boot.

"Upon my word, I like it so much that, if you would sell it, I would gladly buy it of you."

"Sell it? Not I. But the lad shall take it at once to your Reverence's house."

"I will send Valentine for it."

"Ah, but no one save Vitek may touch it, and it obeys him alone."

They called the boy in; the priest gave him a *złoty* and told him to bring it in the evening, after the round of the parish had been finished. Vitek cried much and, after the priest's departure, took Bociek with him to the byre, where he blubbered aloud till dusk; then Boryna came to silence him and remind him that the bird had to be taken; Vitek unwillingly obeyed, but his heart melted in his breast, and he went about, his eyes swollen with tears and like one half-witted, now and then running to the stork, gathering it in his arms and kissing it, weeping sorely all the while.

So, when the priest was home at nightfall, he wrapped Bociek up in his own little capote, to protect it from the cold, and (together with Yuzka, for the bird was too heavy for him alone to carry) took it over to the priest's: Lapa accompanying them, and barking moodily all the way.

Now, the more the old man weighed the priest's words, and his strong and evidently sincere assertions, the more satisfied and tranquil did he become: so that, slowly and by imperceptible degrees, he changed his attitude towards Yagna.

Yet, though things returned to their former state, the former peace of mind, the deep quiet trust of old, was there no longer.

As when a broken vessel has been repaired with wire woven around it, it indeed looks whole, yet somehow leaks and lets the water through, though the place of leakage is invisible to the eye: so was it likewise in that hut: from within that reconciliation, and through unseen fissures, the secret mistrust it contained came forth by drops; and though resentment was no more so keen, suspicion still remained alive and undying.

Hard as he tried, the old man could not quite rid himself of his distrust. Almost unwittingly, he constantly had an eye on Yagna's every motion; and she, on her part, never forgave his past anger and bitter words, and boiled with resentment that now too she could not but notice how keenly vigilant his eyes were.

Perhaps, too, the certitude that he was watching and put no trust in her made her dislike him more violently, and love Antek more.

She had managed things so dexterously that they often met by the haystack. Vitek was their helper in this. Since the loss of his stork, his master's displeasure troubled him not at all, and he had quite gone over to Yagna. She, on her side, gave him better food to eat, and Antek very often had a few kopeks for the lad. But their chief abettor in this was Yagustynka, who had so crept into Yagna's good graces, and had so won Antek's confidence, that they simply could not do without her. She brought messages to and fro, protected them from surprises on the part of Boryna, and kept good watch over him. All this she did out of pure hatred for people. She wreaked upon others her revenge for the harsh treatment meted out to her. Though she detested both Antek and Yagna, she detested still more the old husband, who was one of the rich men in the village. And yet she had for the poor not less of hatred and even more of scorn!

In truth, she was diabolically wicked . . . and possibly, as folk whispered, evil in a yet more unearthly sense.

"They will," she often said to herself, "one day fly at each other, and fight it out like mad dogs."

In winter there was but little to do; so she used to go with her distaff from hut to hut, listening to the talk and setting folk by the ears and laughing with impartiality at everyone. None durst close their doors on her, partly out of fear of her tongue, partly because she was thought to have the evil eye. At times, too, she looked in at Antek's, but for the most part she met him on his return from work, and brought him news from Yagna.

About a fortnight after the priest's visit, she saw the young man on his way past the pond.

"Do you know? Old Boryna said many things to the priest against you."

"Of what new thing has he been yelping?" was his contemptuous answer.

"He says you stir folk up against the manor, and that the gendarmes ought to arrest you."

"Let him but try! Ere they get hold of me, I would make such a 'Red Cock' perch on his roof, that his place would burn down to the ground," he replied in a great rage.

She at once ran to tell the old man, who thought the news over for a time, and then remarked: "'Tis like him, the villain! He is the very man to do such a thing."

He said no more, not wishing to take counsel with a woman; but to Roch, who came in the evening, he told all.

"Do not believe whatever Yagustynka says: she is an evil-minded beldame."

"Yes, it may be all a falsehood: yet such things have been. Old Prychek burnt his father-in-law's hut down for dealing unjustly by him in dividing the land. True, he went to prison, but he burnt it down. . . . And Antek may do the same. And he must have said something; she could not have made it all up."

Roch, who was a kind-hearted man, felt greatly pained, and tried to advise him.

"Make it up. Let him have a little land for himself: to live, he needs the wherewithal. Besides, that would steady him, and leave him without excuse for quarrels and threats."

"No! Were I even to be quite ruined—made a beggar—no! Beg I may, but, so long as I live, not one inch of my land will I give up. . . . That he struck me and used me shamefully, I could forgive, though hardly and with pain; but should he attempt such a thing as this . . . !"

"Is it meet to take the tattle of a gossip so to heart?"

"I do not believe it, not I!—But what maddens me, what makes my blood run cold, is that it *might* be true!"

He sat with fists clenched, motionless and numb, at the bare possibility of so heinous an act. He had no proof of Yagna's guilt, nay, he felt really sure she was innocent. But he shrewdly guessed that in his son's hatred for him there was more than mere resentment for the land withheld; that the wild reckless look he had seen in Antek's eyes came from some other cause. And he, too, was instantly aware of the same feeling within himself—of cold, revengeful, implacable hate. He turned to Roch, and muttered:

"There is not room enough in Lipka for us twain!"

"What—what can ye mean?" Roch cried in alarm.

"God forbid he fall into my hands, if I seize him in the act!"

Roch did his best to calm him and bring him round, but to no purpose.

"Ah, he would burn me out, would he?—That remains to be seen!"

Thenceforward he had no peace. Every evening he watched in secret, hiding behind corners, making the round of the house and messuages, looking under the thatches; and often, waking up at night, he would listen for hours together or, jumping out of bed, go round the premises with his dog. And once he saw certain faint traces about the haystack, where the ground had been trampled. Later, he found marks of footsteps near the stile, and became more and more convinced that Antek had been there at night, and was only seeking an opportunity to set the rick on fire. For as yet he had no thought of any other possible outrage.

He purchased a very savage dog from the miller, chained it up in a kennel under the shed, and made it more savage still by starving and baiting it. At night he would set it free, and then it would bark furiously and set upon anyone it met. It bit several people so seriously that complaints were lodged against Boryna.

But this vigilance and these precautions made the old man weaker and weaker, though his eyes glowed with feverish excitement.

He had determined to speak and complain to no one any more; this very greatly increased the intensity of his sufferings.

It also prevented anyone from guessing the cause of his restless behaviour.

That he watched so carefully over the premises, and had bought that dog, and made those nightly rounds, found an easy explanation. That winter, wolves had multiplied to an extraordinary degree; almost every night, they would approach the village in packs, and the inhabitants often heard them howl; not infrequently, too, they scratched holes under the byres, and carried off something here and there. Moreover, as was common enough just before the spring, cases of theft became more rife. A peasant in Debitsa had been robbed of a couple of mares; in Rudka, a hog had been stolen; elsewhere, a cow was missing. Therefore did many a man in Lipka scratch his head, and get better locks, and keep good watch over his stables; for the horses there were the very best in the district.

So the days went on, slowly, regularly, like the hands of a clock—only neither to be pushed forward nor set back.

Not only was the winter uncommonly severe, but the weather was also unusually changeable. There were such frosts as the oldest inhabitants had never known; sometimes the snow would fall in immense quantities; then it would thaw for whole weeks together, so that the ditches were filled with water, and the fields stretched out, black and desolate: after which there would be whirlwinds and snowdrifts such as the land had never seen as yet—and then a spell of serene calm weather, when the lanes swarmed with children, and the folk were glad, and the old people basked against the warm sunny walls.

In Lipka things went on according to the everlasting ordinance. He that was predestined to death died; whoso was to be glad rejoiced; he that was fated to be sick confessed his sins, and awaited the end. And so, with the help of God, they continued to live on, from day to day, from week to week.

Meanwhile, every Sunday, the band played loud in the tavern, and there they danced, quarrelled at times, or even came to blows: wherefore the priest chid them sternly from the pulpit, and many troubles came of it. Klemba's daughter married, and they enjoyed themselves, dancing for three whole days; and—so folk said—Klemba had to borrow fifty roubles of the organist to pay the expenses. The Soltys, too, gave a fairly good banquet at his daughter's betrothal to Ploshka. Elsewhere there were christenings, but not many now: numbers of women were expecting a child in spring.

It was then that old Prychek died; after but one week's sickness he died, poor man! at only threescore and four years of age. All the village went to his funeral, for his children had made a grand funeral feast.

In certain huts they came together to spin, and so many girls and farm-lads were there that they enjoyed themselves perfectly, with plenty of laughter and gladness; especially as Matthew, now quite well again, was mostly present, and the life of the party wherever he went.

The village was thus alive and humming with continual gossip and scandal; invectives now and then, and bickering, or only bits of interesting news. And from time to time there would come one of those *Dziads* who had seen and could tell of many a place and thing; and such a one would stay with them for many a week.

Or, again, a letter would sometimes come in from somebody's boy in the army. Oh, then!—how it was read over, and commented on, and talked about, with lasses' sighs and mothers' tears, for whole weeks and more!

What other topics were there? Well, Magda had taken service at the tavern; and Boryna's dog had bitten Valek's boy, who had threatened to bring an action; and Andrew's cow, stuffed too full of potatoes, had choked and swollen so that Ambrose had to slaughter her; and Gregory had borrowed a hundred and fifty roubles of the miller and given a meadow in pledge for the sum; and the smith had bought a couple of horses, a fact that made folk wonder very much;

and his Reverence had been ill for a whole week, a priest from Tymov coming to take the services in his place. They talked of thieves besides; old twaddling women babbled of ghosts; much was spoken about the wolves that were said to have killed some of the manor sheep; about household matters besides, and happenings in far-off countries, and I know not what more—beyond telling or remembering. And always there was something new, to make the day and the long evenings full of interest.

So it was, too, at Boryna's home; only he stayed in the house continually, and neither went out himself nor would let his family go anywhere. Yagna was wretched about it, and Yuzka grumbled angrily all the day long. The cabin life tired her mortally. The only solace she had was that he did not forbid her to go spinning to those huts (but to those only), where no young folk dwelt. Most of the time, therefore, they stayed moping at home.

One evening—it was towards the end of February—several people had come in, and were all sitting together in the other lodgings, where Dominikova was weaving canvas cloth by lamplight, and the rest of the company crowded round the fire-place, because it was very cold. Yagna and Nastka spun till their spindles hummed. Supper was preparing. Yuzka pottered restlessly about the room, and the old man sat by the chimney-corner, pipe in mouth, puffing away, and thinking deeply.

The stillness was irksome to them all. Only the fire crackled, a cricket chirped in a corner, the loom whirred at regular intervals: but no one spoke. It was Nastka who first broke silence.

"Are you going to spin at the Klembas' to-morrow?"

"Roch has promised to be there, and to read a book about our kings of old."

"I should like to go, but I cannot tell as yet," she replied, with a questioning glance at her husband.

"Oh, pray do let me go, Father," Yuzka begged.

He did not answer. The dog was barking loud outside,

and in came Yasyek, nicknamed Topsy-turvy, looking about him apprehensively.

"Shut the door after you, you gaby!" Dominikova shouted at him. "This is not a cow-byre."

"Do not be so frightened," Yagna added; "no one will eat you.—Why do you look round so?"

"Because of that stork. . . . He is somewhere in hiding, belike, ready to peck at me!" he stammered, peering into the corners in alarm.

"No," Vitek growled in reply, "he will harm you no more: Master has sent Bociek away."

"And I cannot tell why ye kept the bird at all: he did naught but mischief."

"Be seated, and give over grumbling," Nastka said, making room for him by her side.

"Ha!" Vitek exclaimed complainingly, "whom did he ever hurt save fools and strange dogs? He would walk the room, strutting like any Squire. . . . And he caught mice . . . and was never in the way. . . . And now they have sent him from us!"

"Be comforted: you will tame another when spring comes round, since you care so much for storks."

"Not I! This same one will ever be mine. I have a contrivance to bring him to me, as soon as we shall have warm weather: he cannot choose but come."

Yasyek was most inquisitive as to Vitek's contrivance; but the latter told him rudely that what he could not find out by himself he would not be told, and that only a fool could be so greedy of another's contrivances.

For this he was rebuked by Nastka, who took Yasyek's part; and indeed he was much in her thoughts. True, he was rather foolish, and the village folk laughed at him; but then he was an only child, with ten acres of land; whereas (as she well knew) Simon had only five, and very possibly his mother would not let him marry her; so she kept on good terms with Yasyek, holding him in reserve, should Simon fail.

He was sitting by her side, staring at her, and thinking of something to say, when in rushed the Voyt, who had by this time made it up with Boryna. He called out from the very threshold:

"News for you! You are to appear in court to-morrow at noon."

"In the action about my cow?"

"Aye, against the manor."

"I must be off betimes to-morrow; it is a long way. Vitek, go this instant to Pete and get everything ready. You are to go, too, as a witness.—Is Bartek notified?"

"I have brought all the summonses from the court bureau to-day: there will be a lot of you together. And if the manor is at fault, let it pay up."

"Pay it must!—Such a cow as that!"

"Come with me into the other rooms," the Voyt whispered; "I have to talk with you."

They went out, and remained so long that Yuzka had to take supper in to them.

The Voyt, as he had more than once done already, entreated him not to make enemies of the manor folk, to put matters off, see how things would turn out, and beware of joining with Klemba and his party. Boryna had hitherto seemed to waver, calculating chances. He did not refuse to listen, but did not care to join the Voyt's side, still feeling indignant at the slight offered him by the Squire, when he had come to the miller's lately.

Seeing that he made no impression, the Voyt tried alluring him with a bait.

"Ye know that I, with the miller and the smith, have come to an agreement with the manor: that we are to cart the trunks to the saw-mill and, when sawn into planks, to the town."

"Yes, yes, of course I know: tongues wag about it quite enough, and say you prevent folk from earning any money."

"Much do I care! But let me tell you now what we three have settled. Hearken to what I say."

The old man shot a glance at him and listened attentively.

"We want you to be one of us. You shall cart the very same quantity of timber. Ye have a good pair of draught-horses, the wagoner will only have to drive, and the profit is certain. Payment is by the cubic metre. You will have earned fivescore roubles ere it be possible to work in the fields."

Boryna pondered long. "When do you begin work?" he asked.

"From to-morrow. They are already cutting down timber in the nearest clearings. The roads are fairly good, sledges being still available. My man is to start off on Thursday."

"A plague upon it! If I but knew whether my action will succeed to-morrow!"

"Only join us, and all will be well.—I, the Voyt, have spoken."

Boryna remained plunged for a while in dubious musings; he eyed the Voyt with attention, chalked something on the bench, scratched his head, and said finally:

"I am with you in this undertaking."

"Good. Come to the miller's to-morrow, after the judgment, and we shall talk the matter over further. I must be off now, to get my sledge-runners tinkered up at the blacksmith's."

Away he went in high glee, assured that he had, by this offer of partnership in cartage, bought the old man over to his side.

Truly, though, the miller might make one with the manor: his land was not on the village register, nor had he any rights over the forest. So too might the Voyt, whose lands had been taken from the clergy by the Russians; so might the smith: but not he, not Boryna! He said: "Cartage is one thing, and the forest dispute is another. Ere an agreement is come to, or we have a complete rupture, many a day must elapse. Why not, then, get my immediate profit out of the partnership, and yet hold fast to our rights? There are, in any case, some scores of roubles of clear gain. I should

have to keep the servant and feed the horses, in any case."

He smiled, rubbed his hands, and chuckled over the situation.

"They have no more sense than so many sheep, thinking to take me in like a silly calf. Silly themselves!"

In rare good humour, he went back to his womenfolk. Yagna was out of the room. She had, they told him, gone out to feed the swine.

He talked gaily, bantered Yasyek and Dominikova, awaiting his wife the while with increasing uneasiness. She was absent very long. Quietly and without a word, he went out into the yard. The lads were in the barn, making ready the sledge for the morrow's ride. He looked into the stables, the byre, the sties: Yagna was nowhere to be seen. For a time he stood waiting under the eaves in the dark. It was a sombre night with a cold howling gale, great dark clouds chasing each other across the sky and, from time to time, some white flakes falling.

Presently a dusky figure loomed in the path beyond the stile. Dashing forward, Boryna leaped the stile, and whispered fiercely:

"Where have you been, say?"

Yagna, though scared, carried it off boldly:

"'Covering my feet.' Would you pry into everything?" she said with a mocking laugh, and went in.

He spoke no more about that; and when they went to bed, he said in a quiet friendly tone, though without raising his eyes:

"Would ye like to go to the Klembas' to-morrow?"

"Surely, along with Yuzka.—Unless ye forbid."

"I must go to the law-court, and leave my house to the care of Providence. It were better ye should stay at home."

"But will ye not be back by dusk?"

"I fear not. Perhaps only late in the night. It looks like snow, and we may have hard work coming home. But if ye will go, you may; I do not forbid you."

CHAPTER IX

THE snow had been, since early morning, threatening to fall. The day rose, cloudy and very boisterous; grains of snow came down, minute, like unsifted groats; and the gale, gaining in strength as the morning advanced, and constantly changing its direction, howled loud and dismally.

The weather notwithstanding, Hanka had set out with her father and several *Komorniki* immediately after noontide, to get dry wood for fuel in the forest.

The gusts raged over the fields, shaking the trees, blowing clouds of fallen snow into the air again, whistling and shrieking, and casting them down once more, as when a linen cloth, full of white hemp peel, is shaken out. Everything was lost to sight in the raging turmoil.

Once clear of the village, they went forward in single file along the pathways between the sown crops, towards the pine-forest, now scarce visible through the falling snow.

The wind, increasing in intensity, smote upon them from every quarter, dancing wildly round them, and buffeted and struck them so violently that they could hardly stand. They crawled along, bending down towards the ground; while it rushed on, gathered up dry snow mingled with sand, and returned to dash it in their faces.

Slowly they plodded onward, making half-audible sounds, and rubbing their hands with snow; for the piercing frost went through and through their thin garments; and the numerous snow-drifts around the piles of stones or the trees were continually blocking the way, and had to be turned, thus lengthening their journey a good deal.

Hanka walked foremost, often looking back at her father, bowed down, and with his head in a shawl. He was dressed

in a cast-off sheepskin of Antek's, and girt with a band of straw; and he dragged along at the tail, panting, forced every now and then to stop, rest, and wipe his eyes, which were watering with the blast. Then he would hasten on, crying: "I am coming, Hanka, I am coming; fear not, I shall not lag behind."

Certainly he would have much preferred staying in the chimney corner. But when she, poor thing! went out in such weather, how could he remain at home? Besides, it was unbearably cold in the hut; the children shivered and shuddered all the time; they could not cook anything, and ate only dry bread.

Hanka, with set teeth, walked on in front of the *Komorniki.*—Yes, it had come to that: Filipka, Krakalina, old Kobusova, Magda, Kozlova, the very poorest in the whole place, were now her companions.

She sighed to think of it: yet it was by no means the first time she had been out thus with them.

"Let it be so! Let it be so!" she said in a hard whisper, striving for strength and patience.

Since it had to be, well, she was willing; she would go and seek for firewood along with those paupers, and never weep, nor complain, nor beg anyone to help her.

And, indeed, to whom could she go? They might give her something, but with it also a word of pity . . . such pity as might well wring the life-blood out of the heart! . . . No: the Lord Jesus was trying her, had sent her a cross: perhaps He would reward her ere long. . . . And, in any case, she would bear all—never give way or let anyone pity or mock her!

In these last times, she had suffered so much that every part of her shook with agony, each crushing her with its own particular pang.

It was not because of her poverty and the slights that went with it, the hunger in her cabin, and the food, insufficient even for the children; not because Antek drank his earnings away in the tavern with those boon companions of his, caring nothing for his family, and often (when he had

crept home by stealth, like a vagabond dog) answering any word of remonstrance with a blow. She could forgive all that. "He was out of sorts, and his mood would pass, if she did but wait patiently."—But that he was unfaithful to her, that she could not forget!

No, she could not! What, with a wife and children, yet mindful of neither, and so utterly absorbed in *her!*

The thought tore at her heart like the red-hot pincers of mediæval tortures.

"He loves Yagna, he dotes upon her: she is the cause of all this!"

And the anguish of neglect and scorn and contumely; and her shame, her jealousy, her craving for revenge—all these monsters were incessantly tormenting her and plunging their venomous fangs into her heart!

"Have mercy, O Lord! Spare me, O Jesus!" she would groan in spirit, raising to Heaven those eyes of hers, red with ever-falling tears.

She quickened her pace; the gale was so high upon the hills not yet sheltered by the forest, that she felt intolerably cold. The women with her, on the contrary, slackened their steps and now lagged behind—blurs almost unseen in the mist of swirling whiteness. The forest was near; and when that mist cleared up for an instant, it suddenly appeared on the snowy plain like a huge wall of trunks in serried array.

"Come on faster," she called out impatiently; "we shall rest when we get to the wood."

But they were in no hurry, stopping frequently, and crouching down on the snow, heads away from the wind, like a covey of partridges, while they talked together.

To her call, Filipka answered in surly fashion:

"Hanka is like a dog speeding after a crow—thinks she will get it if she hastes."

"Poor thing!" murmured Krakalina, sympathetically; "how she has come down in the world!"

"Oh, well, she was warm enough at Boryna's, and has tasted good things: let her now taste things that are evil. Some starve all the years of their lives, yet none pities them."

"There was a time when she would not have bid us good day."

"My dear, there is a saying: 'Wealth gives a wreath to the brow; poverty, wings to the feet.'"

"Once I would have borrowed a mallet of her, and she said it was for her own use alone."

"True, open-handed she was not, and she thought not a little of herself, as do all the Boryna folk; but I am sorry for her, nevertheless."

"To be just, that husband of hers is a scoundrel."

"Were it any business of mine, I'd take Yagna to task on the high road, rate her, curse her, and swinge her soundly."

"That too may come to pass—worse still, peradventure."

"The woman's of the brood of Paches. . . . And her mother was just the same in her youth."

"Let us on: the wind is falling, and may go quite down ere nightfall."

Presently they all entered the forest, and separated, but so as to be within call for the home-coming. And the gloomy depths swallowed them up so entirely that they soon could see hardly anything of one another.

It was a vast forest of old pine-trees, all standing close to each other, straight and slender and strong; whose trunks, overgrown with whitish-green lichens, looked like pillars of verdigris-stained copper, peering forth amidst green verdure, flecked with grey, in impenetrable ranks. Chilly mournful sounds rose up from the snow underfoot; overhead, athwart ragged pine-boughs, as through a broken thatch, the sky was visible.

The wind blew above them; but at times all seemed as still as in a church, when the organs suddenly cease to play, and the chants are heard no more, and nothing is audible save deep sighs, the shuffling of feet, the mumbling of prayers in a faint dying hum: so the forest stood motionless, mute, listening, as it were, to a far-away thundering—to the wild cry of the ravaged fields which, rising up from some remote spot, was heard only as a feeble moan.

By and by, however, the gale struck the forest with all its

force—struck against its close-set trunks, assailing its depths, shrieking in its dim nooks, and fighting an army of giants. —Only to be defeated: its might gave way, collapsed, grew weak, died in the compact undergrowth of brushwood. The forest itself was unmoved; not a single branch waved, nor did any trunk vibrate; within, the silence was deeper yet, still more awful; only a bird or two was heard to flutter about in the shadows.

But, now and again, there would come a squall of lightning swiftness and power, like a hungry falcon swooping down upon its prey: it took hold of the tree-tops and, with an overwhelming shock, trampled and crushed and shattered them in roaring frenzy. Then did the forest, as if roused from slumber, wake up and shake itself and, shuddering from one end to the other, rock its trees, swaying with a dull but hurtling and ominous clangor; it rose again, stiffening and straightening itself once more, uttering a terrible cry, and struggling like a wrestler blind and mad with rage; and the hubbub rent the air, and there was fighting within the wood to its innermost depths. Every creature that lurked and dwelt in the thick copses shrank back in dismay to its lair; and, maddened with alarm, the fowls of the air flew wildly about in the midst of the snow-showers and avalanches of broken snapped-off boughs that fell from the tree-tops.

And, after this, there would follow long death-silences, in which heavy thuds were heard afar off.

"They are felling the trees in Vilche Doly; how fast the work goes on!" old Bylitsa murmured, as he gave ear to the dull throbbing sounds.

"Hurry, hurry! we must return before night!"

They plunged into a clump of tall young saplings, where brushwood and scrub had so intermingled their thickly tangled branches that they scarce could force their way through. A sepulchral stillness reigned around; no sound reached there; even light hardly filtered through the thick layer of snow which crusted the trees all over, hanging like a roof overhead. This secluded nook was earthy-ashy grey, very little snow having been wafted to the ground, which was

strewn, knee-deep in places, with dry dead boughs; elsewhere with great masses of green moss; with berry-shrubs, yellow, faded, cowering close to the ground as in fear; and with dried clusters of toadstools.

Hanka went about actively, breaking off the biggest branches she could find, cutting them all to the same length, and then putting them into the open piece of canvas she had brought; working with such ardour that she had to take off her shawl, she felt so warm. In about an hour's time, she had gathered a bundle of faggots so large that she could scarcely lift it. Her father, too, had made a pretty large bundle himself, and tied it up with a cord, dragging it along in search of a tree-stump, where he might with more ease hoist it on to his shoulders.

They called out to the women; but the blast blew so furiously through the vast forest that they could not make them hear.

"Hanka, we must go back by the poplar-road: it will be better than the cut through the fields."

"Come, then. Keep your eyes upon me, and do not lag too much behind."

They at once struck off to the left, through a bit of old oak-forest. But it was hard work getting on, the snow being more than knee-deep here; and now and then came still worse patches, where the leafless trees were scanty and there hung down from the mighty outspread branches huge long beards of caked snow: here and there, too, some slender sapling, covered with a shaggy rusty fell of dead leaves, would bend down, striking the earth in the whistling wind.

It was still blowing hard, with the air so full of snow that there was no going any farther. Old Bylitsa's strength at once gave way, and he came to a standstill. Even Hanka felt exhausted; but she only leaned with her bundle against a tree, and sought for some better road.

"We shall never get through this way. Besides, there is a marsh beyond the oak-forests. Let us go back through the fields."

They somehow made their way back to the great dense pine wood, where it was somewhat less gusty, and the snow less deep. Then they came out upon the fields. But here they were met by such a driving blizzard that they could not see a stone's throw in front of them. The wind was constantly blowing towards the forest, whence driven back as from a wall, it rushed again into the fields, where, strong as ever, it caught up whole hillocks of snow, lifted them bodily into the air like great white clouds, which it again hurled against the trees. How it rushed to and fro in the forest! how it eddied! how fiercely it smote upon them both! and how they all but failed to reach the sown fields! The old man fell to the ground, and she had to help him on, little as she herself was able to keep standing.

Back they went to the forest, where, cowering behind some trees, they took counsel together how to come back; for they could not tell in which direction to turn.

"Along the pathway to the left: then we shall be sure to come out on the poplar-road, just by the cross."

"But I do not see the path at all."

He had to give detailed explanations, for she feared to go the wrong way.

"And can ye tell which way to take?"

"To the left, so far as I can guess."

They trudged along, skirting the wood and a little within it, to be sheltered from the assaults of the gale.

"Come quickly, night is falling fast."

"I will, I will, Hanka; let me but breathe awhile."

But it was no easy matter to win through. The path was not to be seen at all; and besides, a terrible wind assailed them from one side, pouring down avalanches. They took shelter behind trees, crouched under juniper-bushes: all in vain. It pierced to the very marrow of their bones, especially when they passed through some glen: the rustling of the trees then would swell to shrieks, and the whole wood sway and rock till the branches almost touched the ground, lashing their faces at times; and now and then a young tree

would fall with such a crash as one might think only a whole uprooted forest could have made.

On they plodded as best they could, to reach the road soon and be home before night: already the fields were turning grey, and over the snowy wilds long dark streaks, like wreaths of smoke, began to appear.

They got to the road at last and, half dead with weariness, fell on their knees before the crucifix.

It stood at the edge of the forest, close to the highway, sheltered by four huge birch-trees, with their white smocks of bark and boughs which dangled like tresses. On a cross of black wood hung a crucified Christ, made of sheet-iron, and painted with lively glowing colours. The winds had partly torn the figure away, for it was suspended by one arm only, and battered the cross as it swung, creaking rustily, as with an appeal for succour and rescue. The weather-beaten birches would conceal it, as they shook and tossed to and fro; clouds of snow, too, drifted past, hiding it under a white mist, through which occasional glimpses of Christ's livid body and bleeding face were seen, peering forth from that pallid veil, and filling the heart of the beholder with compassion.

On this old Bylitsa gazed with awe and crossed himself, but he durst say nothing; for Hanka's face, set, stern, hard, incomprehensible, was like the night now coming on, with blasts, and dim dark snow-tempests: ominously mysterious.

He thought that she saw nothing, heeded nothing. And indeed she sat lost in dreary thought, always revolving that one fact—that Antek had been unfaithful. Within her there was a tempest of sighs as heart-rending as that body of Christ crucified—of tears frozen to ice, yet still burning her to death—of clamorous outcries which agony was wringing from her young life!

"Shameless! Without any fear of Heaven!—Her son-in-law, guilty of incest!—O God! O God!"

The horror of it swept over her as a hurricane. At first dismayed, she presently seethed with angry resentful emo-

tion—like the forest she had seen bowing to the blast, then rising in fury to resist it.

"Let us go on . . . and faster!" she cried. Lifting her bundle on to her shoulders and bending forwards under it, she went forth into the road, never looking back upon the old man, but urged forward by unquenchable implacable resentment.

"Oh, I will pay you for all this; yea, I will pay you in full!" she said, wailing bitterly in spirit; and the bare poplar-trees wailed along with her, as they did battle with the storm.

"I have enough of this. If my heart were of stone, such a blow would break it! . . . If Antek chooses, let him stay abroad and take his ease in the tavern. But her I do not forgive for the wrong she has done me: I will pay her . . . and in full! Yes, even though I rot in prison for it.—If such were to walk God's earth unpunished, then were there no justice in the world!" . . . Such were her thoughts. But after a while her fury burnt itself out, and grew as pallid as the flowers seen when the window-panes are frosted over. Her strength was now almost entirely spent, her burden crushed her down; the hard knots on the pine-faggots bruised her shoulders, and her back was aching sorely; while her bundle, fixed with a stick across her neck, pulled hard at her throat, choking her so that she trudged on ever more heavily and slowly.

The road was all covered with driven snow, and open to the blasts on every side. The poplars, scarcely visible a few yards away, stood in an interminable row, bowing and bending with fearful cries and shrieks as the wind lashed them; struggling as birds in a snare, that scream and beat their wings in vain convulsive outbursts.

On the uplands, the wind had somewhat abated; but down below, its rage was yet greater than before. Down the road it swept, and on either side, and over the plain, and away in the grey blurred distance. The hurricane still raged here, as in a cauldron: a thousand eddying gusts kept

up a goblin dance; a thousand spheres of snow, wafted off the plain, rolled along like enormous white whirling spindles; thousands of snow-piles went moving over the ground; thousands of ridges undulated forward, growing larger and larger, higher and higher, as if they would reach the sky and hide all things from sight—and then collapsed on a sudden with a tumultuous uproar.

The whole country-side looked like a boiling pan, brimming over with white liquid, bubbling and frothing and foaming and steaming; while, with the night, there came multitudinous voices, rising up from the ground, hissing loud overhead, thunderous afar off: sounds like the swishing and cracking of many whips—forest-music as the organ's low rumbling drone at the Elevation—wild long howls that rent the air—cries as of birds, wandering and lost—horrible noises as of unearthly weeping and sobbing; and then silence again—and then the keen dry whistling of the wind in the poplars, that tossed to and fro in the turbid snow-charged air, like fearful phantoms, raising their arms to Heaven!

And Hanka dragged herself along, almost groping her way from poplar to poplar, often stopping to rest, and listening to those weird voices of the evening.

At the foot of one of those poplars, she saw a hare crouch, dark against the snow. At her approach it fled into the snow-storm, which seized it as with the talons of a bird of prey; and it squealed pitifully in its clutch. Hanka cast a glance of sorrowful compassion at the poor beast as it fled.—She could hardly move now, and with great difficulty lifted one foot after another through the snow. The burden weighed her down inexorably; and she often fancied she was bearing on her back the winter, the snow, the winds—everything, in a word; that she had everlastingly been thus walking on, with her sad, bleeding, weary soul, and would continue thus till Doomsday. The road seemed to be lengthening out endlessly, the weight she bore crushed her; she stopped to rest ever more frequently, and with ever longer halts, half insensible as she was. Her face was burn-

ing: she cooled it with snow, rubbed her eyes, braced herself up as well as she could, and went forward to plunge again into that shrieking, bellowing conflict of the elements. But she wept abundantly; the tears gushed forth from her heart, that deep hidden fountain of sorrow: from the very bottom of her heart thus torn asunder, there came the desperate outcry of a creature hopelessly lost. Yet from time to time she would pray, uttering her prayers in a mournful tone, and breathing them out in detached words and phrases. So will a bird, freezing to death, now and again flap its wings; and then, bereft of all strength, alight upon the ground, hop forward a little, chirp a little, and settle down once more in mortal drowsiness.

And so she again set to hurry on with her last remaining strength, stumbling into snow-drifts, sometimes sticking fast in them, but always going onwards, seized and scourged with a sudden fear and alarm, as she thought of her children.

And now the wind brought her a tinkling sound, and the noise of sledge-runners and men's voices, but so brokenly that, though she stopped to listen, she could not make out one word. Someone, however, was certainly driving in her direction; and at last she saw the horses' heads distinctly through the snow-mist.

"It is father-in-law!" she whispered; for she had made out the white spot on the filly's forehead. Then she waited no longer, but turned round to go on.

She had not been mistaken. Boryna, along with Vitek and Ambrose, was on his way back from the district court. They drove slowly, it being difficult to get through the drifts: in some places they had been forced to alight and lead the horses. They seemed to have been drinking, for they were talking and laughing aloud, Ambrose now and then trolling out some snatches of songs.

Hanka got out of their way, and drew her kerchief down over her face, but could not prevent Boryna from recognizing her at once as he drove past, whipping his horses up to get along more quickly. They dashed on, but were stopped

by another snow-drift. Then he looked round and pulled up. When she was again visible and abreast of his sledge, he called out to her:

"Throw your firewood in behind, and get up here: I'll take you home."

She had been so accustomed to do his bidding that now she did it instinctively.

"Bartek has given a lift to Bylitsa, who was sitting and weeping under a tree; they are close behind us."

She answered nothing, but looked round gloomily at the raging chaos of night and snow-storm as she dropped into the front seat, as yet only half conscious. Boryna eyed her with careful scrutiny. She looked so wretched that now she was a painful sight, with her livid frost-bitten face, and eyes swollen with tears, and her mouth set in firm resolve. Shivering with cold and weariness, she vainly tried to wrap herself up in her tattered shawl.

"Ye ought to beware: in such a condition, an illness might easily take you."

"And who will work in my stead?"

"What! go to the forest in such weather as this?"

"We had no more fuel at all, and could not cook our meals."

"Are your little ones well?"

"Little Peter was ill for a fortnight, but has quite recovered now, and could eat twice as much as I give him," she answered, now at her ease and recovering from her state of prostration. Throwing her shawl back, she looked him calmly in the face, without any of the scared meekness of former times. The old man guessed that a transformation had taken place in her, and wondered at it greatly: she was no longer at all the Hanka of old. A sort of glacial repose was now to be felt in her, and her compressed lips told of inflexible firmness and strength. He no longer frightened her as of old; she spoke to him as to an equal and a stranger, without either complaint or reproach; she answered simply and to the point, in a voice which spoke of much suffering

endured, with a certain hardness in her tone which the tempering fire of hidden anguish had wrought; only the gleam of her tearful azure eyes still betrayed an intensely emotional soul.

"Ye have greatly changed."

"Suffering shapes the soul as the smith shapes iron—and sooner."

Her reply amazed him so, he could find nothing to say to it, and turned round to Ambrose to talk about the lawsuit with the manor. In spite of the Voyt's promise, he had lost, and had to pay costs into the bargain.

"I shall," he said confidently, "appeal and succeed."

"That will be hard. The manor-folk have long arms, and manage to succeed everywhere."

"Against them too there's a way—as there always is, if one waits patiently for the right moment."

"You are right, Matthias; but oh, how cold it is! Let's go to the tavern and warm ourselves."

"Very well.—Having spent so much, I can spend a little more.—But ye should know that only a blacksmith should 'strike while the iron's hot.' The man who would overcome must take happenings coolly, and possess his soul in patience."

By the time they had come to the village, the twilight had deepened into thick darkness, and in the dusky air the houses they passed by were indistinguishable; but the storm was slowly subsiding.

Boryna stopped the horses at the path to Hanka's cabin, and got down to help her to get the bundle on her back; when she had alighted, he said in her ear:

"Come round and see me—to-morrow, if you like. I know you are badly off; that scoundrel drinks away all his earnings, leaving you and the children to starve."

"But ye drove us out; how can I dare return?"

"You speak foolishly.—I tell you, come!"

Choking with emotion, she kissed his hand, unable to utter a word.

"Will you come?" he asked, in a strangely kind and tender voice.

"I will, and thankfully; since ye order me, I will come."

He whipped the horses up, and at once turned off to the tavern: while Hanka, not waiting for her father, who was just alighting from Bartek's sledge, hastened back to her hut.

It was dark as pitch there, and seemed even colder than out of doors. The children slept curled up in the feather-bed. She set busily about to make the fire and prepare supper, but was all the while full of her extraordinary meetting with Boryna.

"No! Were he on his death-bed, I must not go: Antek would make me pay too dear!" she cried out angrily. But other thoughts succeeded presently, some of revolt against her husband.

Had anyone in the world made her suffer so much as he?

True, Boryna had made over land to that swinish woman, and had driven them away. But Antek had fought with him first, and had been continually snarling at him, so that the old man lost patience. So long as he lived, he had the right to do with his own land as he pleased.—And how tenderly he had asked her to come just now! . . . and inquired about the children, and everything!—Yes, and never, had not Antek gone after that woman, would there have been half this misery and humiliation. . . . That at least was not in any wise the old man's fault.

And as she went on musing, her resentment against Boryna began to abate.

In then came Bylitsa, half frozen and terribly exhausted. He had to warm himself by the fire for an hour at least, before he could say how he had been unable to go any farther, and possibly might have been frozen to death under that tree but for Boryna.

"He saw me, and would have put me on his sledge; but when I said you were on the road ahead, he left me to Bartek, and drove on to catch up with you."

"Was it so? He never told me that."

"He is not a hard man really, but would have folk think he is."

After supper, when the children had eaten as much as they could, and were tucked up in bed again and asleep, Hanka sat down by the fireside to spin what remained of the organist's wool; and her father still continued warming himself, looking timidly at her, clearing his throat, and gathering courage to speak; which he did at last, though with great hesitation.

"Prithee make it up with him. Think, not of Antek, but of yourself and the children."

"That is easy to say."

"Boryna himself made the first advances. . . . And see: his home is now become a hell. . . . He will surely thrust Yagna away from him; if not at once, he will very shortly. . . . Yuzka can never manage so large an establishment.—If, when that comes to pass, you have found favour in his eyes, it were well. . . . You can render him many a service, and in good season . . . we know not what may happen . . . he may ask you to return . . ."

As he spoke, she let the spindle go and, with her head propped on the top of her distaff, began to think this over and reflect upon her father's advice.

He was now preparing to go to bed, but asked her, in a confidential tone:

"Did he talk to you by the way?"

She told him all.

"Pray go to him, my daughter; go to-morrow morning; go, run to him, since he calls for you. Think but of yourself and of the children. . . . Be on the old man's side, and kind to him. Be like the docile calf, which, folk say, 'thrives, sucks much milk, and waxes stout.'—Remember that 'spite never yet brought success to any man.'—As to Antek, he will return to you. He is now possessed of a devil, and driven to and fro by him; but this will leave him soon, and he will come back to you. Our Lord is watching to deliver you from all these woes in His own good time."

He spent much time exhorting and trying to convince

her; but she made no reply. Disappointed, he said no more, but went to bed and lay silent. Hanka went on spinning and pondering his words.

From time to time she rose to see whether Antek was coming. Nothing was to be heard.

She worked, but did not get on well. The thread would break, or the spindle slip from her hand, because she was turning Boryna's words over in her mind.

Peradventure it might prove true: the hour might strike when he would call her back again!

And by slow, slow degrees there grew up in her mind the desire—feeble at first, at last invincible—for peace and reconciliation with Boryna.

"We three are destitute: there will be a fourth presently . . . and what shall I do then?"

She no longer took Antek into account, but considered herself and children, and felt she must decide for them all—must and would.

If she could but once more get back that position of housewife at Boryna's and feel ground again, she thought, she would take up her duties so thoroughly and earnestly that nothing should ever prevent their perfect fulfilment. and hope grew within her heart, and waxed so great, and filled her with such strength and energy and courage, that her eyes flashed at the thought, and she felt all on fire.

For a long space she enjoyed this waking dream of hers—perhaps till midnight—and made up her mind to go to Boryna the next day, and take the children along with her, though Antek might forbid, and even beat her. She would not obey him, but take the opportunity offered and go: she was now aware of unconquerable power in herself, and felt ready to fight the whole world, if she must.

Once more she looked out of doors. The wind had quite gone down; in the black night, the snow appeared dark grey. Huge clouds passed in the sky, like rolling waters; and out of the far-off woods, and from the invisible shadows, there came a feeble murmur.

Having put the light out and said her prayers, she began to undress.

Suddenly a distant stifled noise rose out of the silence around her, quivering,—grew stronger and stronger, and at the same time a ruddy glow shone athwart the panes.

She ran out in terror.

Somewhere in the midst of the village, a conflagration had broken out: a column of flame rose up, with smoke and a swarm of sparks.

The alarm-bell sounded presently, and the cries rang louder.

"Up! Up! There's a fire!" she screamed to Staho in the other lodgings, dressed in a hurry, and rushed forth into the road, where she was met by Antek, running from the village.

"Where's the fire?"

"Can't tell.—Go in!"

"It may be at Father's . . . 'tis somewhere very nigh!" she stammered, mortally afraid.

"Blood of a dog! get in!" he bellowed, thrusting her into the hut by main force.

He was covered with blood, bare-headed; his sheepskin was rent in two, his face blackened and grimy, and his eyes glowed like a madman's.

CHAPTER X

ON that same day, when work was over and the evening well on towards night, they began to drop in at Klemba's for the grand spinning-party.

Dame Klemba had invited elderly women, for the most part, kinswomen or good friends of hers, and they had all come in proper time, as careful not to be late as not to disregard the invitation.

First of all, according to her custom, came Vahnikova, plentifully supplied with wool, and carrying several spindles under her arm. Then Golab, Matthew's mother, with a vinegar-face, always bound up, who always complained of everything; after her, Valentova the talkative—a huffy woman who cackled like a hen; and Sikora's wife, a terrible gossip, thin as a broomstick, and much interested in all her neighbours' quarrels. And then rolled in Ploshka's wife, tubby, red-faced, plethoric, always over-dressed, high and mighty to everybody, and gifted with rare powers of speech, which made her generally disliked. Afterwards there quietly slipped in Balcerkova, skinny, undersized, withered, and sly; an ill-tempered woman, and such a lawsuit-maker that she was on fighting terms with half the village, and went to the law-courts every month. And now boldly stepped in (uninvited, indeed) the woman Kobus, Voytek's wife, so malicious a gossip and so rank a shrew that folk shunned her friendship as they would fire. Also came, breathing heavily and in a hurry, Gregory's wry-mouthed wife, a drunkard, a cheat, and given to practical jokes—especially such as did harm to her neighbours. Then old Sohova (Klemba's son-in-law's mother), a very quiet woman, most religious, and (Dominikova excepted) the one who spent most time in church. There were others also, too

hard to describe, being as like one another as geese in a flock, and indiscernible, save by their attire. All these came —an assembly of matrons, each bringing with her something or other: wool or flax to spin, or hurds; some with linen to sew, or feathers to make up for bedding—not willing to be seen empty-handed, as if they had only come to talk.

They formed a large circle in the centre of the room, under a lamp that hung from the ceiling; and they looked like a clump of bushes, well-grown, mature, and blighted by late autumn; for all were elderly, and all about the same age.

Klembova welcomed them all with the same friendly greeting, but spoke low; she was short of breath, her lungs being in a bad state. Klemba, as a good sensible man, who loved to be on pleasant friendly terms with everybody, said some kind words to each, and set the tables and benches for them himself.

Yagna arrived somewhat later, with Yuzka and Nastka, and a few other girls, together with a sprinkling of young men who dropped in subsequently.

It was a big gathering. The winter was a hard one, and the days irksome to pass. People cared little to go to bed as fowls to roost; that would give them overmuch time to lie in bed till daybreak, and make their sides ache with weariness.

They seated themselves, some on benches, others on chests. Klemba's sons, too, brought in tree-stumps from the yard for the boys to sit down upon, and there was room enough for all. The hut, though of no height, was very large, built in the old style, most likely by Klemba's great-great-grandfather, and a hundred and fifty years old or more. It was already tottering with age, leaning slantwise like a stooping old man; in places, the thatched eaves almost touched the hedge beneath, and had to be propped up.

After a time, the talk grew louder and more general, while the spindles twirled and whirled and hummed on the floor, and a spinning-wheel buzzed here and there.

Klemba's sons were four: tall slender striplings, with bud-

ding moustaches. They sat close to the door, engaged in twisting ropes of straw. The other young fellows were sitting in corners, smoking cigarettes, grinning and joking with the lasses, and making them giggle till the room rang again.

At last Roch, whom they had long expected, came in, followed by Matthew.

"Is it windy still?" someone asked.

"No wind at all; the weather will change."

"It surely is going to thaw," Klemba added; "we hear the forest moaning."

Roch, who now taught a class at the Klembas', and lodged and boarded there, sat down to eat at a separate table. Matthew greeted some of the company, but did not so much as glance at Yagna, whom he made out he had not seen, although she was straight in front of him. At that she smiled faintly, with her eyes fixed on the entrance door.

"Well, it has been blowing all day long, Heaven preserve us!" Sohova said. "Some women have crept back from the forest, half dead; and they say Hanka and her father, who were among them, are missing."

"Ah, yes," Kobusova grunted. " 'Wherever the poor man goes, the wind against him blows.' "

"Alas! Hanka has come down indeed . . ." Ploshkova was beginning to say, but stopped and talked of something else on seeing how red Yagna had turned.

"Has not Yagustynka been here?" Roch inquired.

"She is not wanted: our company takes no pleasure in slandering and backbiting."

"A wicked hag she is! This very day she set the Voyt and the Soltys' wives so by the ears that they fell to railing and would have fought, had not the company prevented them."

"That's because they let her talk as she pleases."

"And there's no one to pay her out for her spiteful words and mischief-making."

"Yet all know what she is: why listen to her snarls?"

"True: we never know when she is lying and when not."

"They let her, because they all enjoy hearing her talk against someone else," Ploshka's wife concluded.

Teresa, a soldier's wife, here called out: "Let her say one word against me! She would pay it dear!"

Whereupon Balcerek's wife said to her, sarcastically: "Why, is she not telling tales against you in the village all day long?"

"Repeat—repeat them, whatsoever ye have heard!" she shouted, flushing crimson: it was a matter of general knowledge that she was on exceedingly intimate terms with Matthew.

"I will, and to your face, when your goodman is back from the army."

"Beware what ye say of me! What, will ye babble and gabble here?"

"Wherefore scream, when none accuses you!" Ploshka's wife cried out in rebuke; but Teresa was not soon appeased, and she muttered to herself for a good while.

"Have they been here, with the 'bear?'" Roch asked, to change the subject.

"They are at the organist's now, and will be here at once."

"Who are the performers?"

"Why, the sons of Gulbas and Filipka; who but they, the rogues!"

"Here they come!" the lasses cried. In front of the cabin, a long-drawn roar resounded; then various animals' cries: cocks crowing, sheep bleating, horses whinnying: all this to the accompaniment of a fife. Finally, the door opened, and a young fellow came in, clad in a sheepskin coat, turned inside out, and a tall fur cap, with his face so blackened, he looked like a gipsy. He came pulling the "bear" in question after him by a rope, covered all over with shaggy brown pea-straw, save for a head of fur with paper ears that he could shake at will, and a tongue that hung out for more than a foot. To his arms were fastened staves with pea-straw twisted round them, so that he seemed

to go on all fours. After him went the other bear-leader, wielding a straw lash in one hand, and in the other a club that bristled all over with sharp pegs, to which bits of fat bacon, loaves and bulky packets were stuck. In the rear walked Michael, the organist's boy, playing the fife, and a number of youngsters with sticks, tapping on the floor and shouting vociferously.

The bear-leader "praised God," crowed, bleated, neighed like a rampant stallion, and, lifting up his voice, spoke thus:

"We, bear-leaders, come from a foreign clime, beyond the ocean and the endless forests, where men walk upside down, use sausages for palings, and fire to cool themselves; where pots are set to boil in the sun, and where the sky rains vodka: thence have we brought this savage bear! It has been told us that there are in this village wealthy husbandmen, good-natured housewives—and fair maidens too. And therefore from that foreign clime have we come, beyond the Danube, to obtain kind treatment, have our needs supplied, and something given us for our pains!—Amen."

"Show, then, what ye can do," said Klemba; "peradventure there may be something for you in the larder."

"Instantly.—Ho, play the fife there; and you, bear, dance!" the bear-leader cried. Then the fife poured forth one of its sweetest tunes, and the lads tapped the floor with their sticks, and shouted loudly in cadence, while the leader mimicked the voices of many a beast, and the "bear" jumped about as on all fours, twitching his ears, putting his tongue out and in again, and running after the girls. The bear-leader seemed to be pulling him back, and struck with his lash at everyone within his reach, crying:

"Have found no husband yet, lass?—A rope's end you shall get, lass!"

The noise in the room, with the racket and scampering and squealing, waxed louder and louder; and the merriment grew to its height, when the bear began to frolic wildly, rolling on the floor, roaring, leaping for fun, and catching at the girls with his long wooden arms, making them dance to the tunes

played on Michael's fife: the two bear-leaders, meanwhile, and the lads who accompanied them, making such an uproar that the old cabin might well have fallen to pieces with the horse-play and the din and fun of it.

Then, Klemba's wife having treated them very bountifully, they left the place; but far along the road came the sound of shouting men and barking dogs.

"Who played the bear?" Sohova asked, when they had quieted down.

"Could ye not find out? Why, Yasyek Topsy-turvy."

"How could I know him, with that shaggy head of fur?"

"My dear," Kobusova observed, "for such games as that, the doodle has quite enough sense."

"Yasyek is not such a fool as ye make him out to be!" said Nastka, taking his part. No one contradicted her; but sly significant smiles flickered on many faces. They again sat down and began chattering merrily. The girls, headed by Yuzka, who was the least shy of them all, crowded round the fire-place where Roch sat, coaxing and teasing him to tell them some such story as he had told at Boryna's in the autumn.

"Well, Yuzka, do you remember the tale I told you then?"

"Certainly: 'twas about the Lord Jesus and His dog Burek."

"If ye care, I will tell this evening about our kings of old."

They placed a stool for him beneath the lamp, made a circle round him, and he sat in their midst like an old hoary oak in a clearing, compassed about with a clump of many bushes. He spoke deliberately and in a quiet voice.

A hush fell upon them all; only the spindles hummed on, and the logs crackled now and again upon the hearth. And Roch told them many a marvellous tale: of the kings and the bloody wars of old; of the mountains amidst which there now sleeps an army of enchanted warriors, awaiting but the sound of the trumpet to start up and fall on the foe and purge the land of evil; of the great castles, in whose golden chambers white-clad enchanted princesses, expect-

ing their deliverer, mourn in the moonlit nights; and of those where music is heard nightly in the empty rooms, and multitudes assemble there to dance, who at cock-crow vanish and go back to their tombs. They listened; the spindles no longer twisted under their fingers; their minds went forth into that world of marvels, and their eyes flashed, and tears of ineffable rapture welled up, their hearts well-nigh bursting their bosoms with longing and amazement.

Roch wound up by telling them of a king nicknamed by his nobles the "Peasant King," because he was humane, just and good to all folk alike; of his terrible wars, and of his wanderings in the disguise of a peasant, when he went about the land and lived with his people as a brother, so that he knew of the evil things done, and could redress the wrongs; and how, after that, that he might be yet more at one with the peasants, he married a husbandman's daughter, Sophia by name, who dwelt nigh Cracow; and, taking her to the castle in that city, he reigned there for many years, the father of his people, and the best husbandman in the country.

To all this they listened with rapt attention, not missing one word, and even holding their breath for fear of interrupting the stream of wonders told them. As to Yagna, she was now quite unable to spin any more; her hands had fallen to her sides, and with head bowed and one cheek pressed on the top of her distaff, she fixed her turquoise-blue eyes on Roch's face. He seemed to her like a saint, come out of a picture-frame; so holy he looked, with his grey hair, his long white beard, and those pale eyes of his that seemed to be gazing at something far away. She listened with all her might—the might of an exceedingly impressionable heart—so earnestly taking in all he said, that emotion hardly suffered her to breathe. His words brought everything plainly before her mind's eye; and where he led, she too followed in spirit.—What struck her most of all was his tale about the king and his peasant queen; oh, how beautiful she thought it!

"And did the king himself live so—together with the peasants?" Klemba asked, after a long silence.

"He did."

"Lord!" whispered Nastka; "if a king spoke to me, I should die of fear!"

"And I would follow him all over the world to get one word from him . . . one word!" Yagna cried, passionately.

They then put many a question to Roch. Where could those castles be found? and that army? and those great riches and beautiful things? and those kings, so mighty?—where?

He answered, somewhat sadly, but with wisdom, pointing out to them so many a deep truth and holy maxim that they all sighed, and fell to reflecting on the ways of God's providence in this world.

"Yes," said Klemba, "to-day is ours; to-morrow belongs to the Lord!"

But Roch was tired, and needed some rest. As all were highly interested in the wonderful tales told, each began, at first in whispers, and then aloud, to tell of such things as they too had heard.

One told one tale, another a second, and this reminded a third of something else, each bringing in a fresh point of interest. So the tales glided on like spun threads, and softly as the moonbeams that light up the dead dark waters in the secret woodlands.—They told how a drowned woman came back to suckle her hungry babe, whose cries had drawn her; and how an aspen stake must be thrust through the heart of a vampire in its coffin, that it may not come out to suck human blood any more; how there are noonday phantoms that lurk in lanes between fields, to strangle children. They spoke of talking trees, of horrible midnight spectres, of hanged men, of witches, of bound souls, doing penance upon earth—and of many another weird and awful thing that made the hair to stand on end, the heart to faint with horror, and all that heard to shudder, frozen with dread. Then they sat mute, looking apprehensively

one at the other, and lending an ear: they fancied someone was walking about the loft over the ceiling, or lurked hid outside the windows; that glaring eyes glowed upon them through the panes, or dim shadowy forms skulked in nooks and corners; and more than one made the sign of the cross, and said prayers with chattering teeth. But this mood was swift to pass away, like a cloud, when it has glided over the sun and one has forgotten that it ever was there. And they then set once more to chatter and spin long, long yarns, which Roch heard attentively, till at last he joined their talk, and related a certain fable about a horse.

"Once upon a time, a poor five-acre husbandman possessed a horse, whose nature was slothful and evil beyond words. He was good to it, but that was of no use; he fed it well, but it never was pleased. And it would do no work at all, but pulled its harness to pieces, and lashed out so viciously that no one could go near it. . . . At last its master, seeing that kindness was of no avail, grew mightily angry and, harnessing the horse to a plough, set it to till a field that had long lain fallow, thinking to wear it out thereby, and weary it into obedience. It refused to draw; then he gave it so sound a flogging as made it submit and work. But it thought it had been grievously ill-used, and the memory rankled, with craving to be revenged at a convenient season. And when the husbandman one day had stooped down to set its hind legs free, crash! the horses's hoofs struck out and killed him on the spot; and it set off to roam the world at liberty.

"Throughout the summer, things went fairly well with him. He lay in the shade, or ate the corn on strangers' lands. But winter came round, the snow fell, there was little to eat, and he was pinched with cold. Therefore he went farther and farther away to get food. He had to run day and night, the wolves following him close and often biting his flanks very deep.

"Away he ran, and ran, and ran, even to the confines of the winter—to a meadow where the weather was warm, the grass knee-deep and over, and streamlets sparkled in the

sun, with cool shadows moving to and fro upon their banks, and a pleasant breeze blowing over them. He went to eat that grass, for he was famishing: but, whenever he thought to get a mouthful, it was only a mouthful of hard stones he got: the grass had disappeared. Then he would fain taste some water: it was there no more, but only stinking mire in its stead! He sought the shade to lie down: it floated away, and he was burned and baked by the sun.—Then he would have returned to the forests: they too had vanished! The poor horse neighed in distress, and other horses answered him; and, following the sound, he at last got beyond the meadow and came to a great farm-house. All of silver it seemed to be, its panes as of prēcious jewels, its thatch like the star-studded sky; and several folk were there, going to and fro. He crawled after them, for now he was willing to labour, no matter how hard, rather than die miserably of hunger. But he lingered on all day in the heat, and no one came to put a halter on him. At evening, however, someone came out: it was the farmer. Now He was the Lord Jesus, the Great Husbandman, the Holiest! and He said:

"'You lazy one, you that have slain a man, you have naught to do here. Not till they that curse you now shall bless you, will I admit you into My stable.'

"'I did but strīke him back, because he beat me.'

"'For that beating he has answered to Me; but I hold all justice in My hands.'

"'I am so starved!' the horse whinnied, 'so thirsty! so tormented with pain!'

"'I have spoken. Away! and I will command the wolves to harry and pursue you.'

"So back went the horse to the land of winter, and dragged himself along in hunger and cold and exceeding great fear; for the wolves—the hounds of the Lord, as it were—hunted him on continually, and scared him with their howls. At last, one spring night, he stood before the gate of his master's dwelling-house, where he neighed, expecting to be received.

"But at that sound the widow and her children rushed out, and, snatching up sticks, staves and cudgels, they beat him cursing him the while for his evil deed, whereby they had come to great misery and destitution.

"Then went he back to the woods, knowing not what else to do. The wild beasts came up against him, and he did not defend himself, for he now thought death as good as life. Howbeit, they only touched his sides, and the chief amongst them said:

" 'Lo, you are too thin—naught but skin on your bones! Eat you we will not, nor wear out our teeth to no purpose: but we shall take pity on you, and help you.'

"They took him with them, and the next morning led him to his master's fields, and put him to the plough that was standing there.

" 'They will plough with you, and make you wax stout; and in the autumn we shall come and unharness you!' So they spake.

"The widow came to the field later; but though she cried, 'A miracle!' seeing him back and about to plough, the bitter memory of what he had done soon made her revile him and beat him as hard as she could. And this she did the next day, and after, continually punishing him for his crime. All the summer he toiled hard and in patience, knowing that he suffered justly. Only after several years, when the widow had taken another husband, and also purchased some more land from a neighbour, did she relent towards the horse, saying unto him:

" 'You did us a grievous wrong; but since by your means the Lord has blessed us with good harvests, and I have got an able husband, and have bought some fields, I fully and freely forgive you.'

"And behold, in that same night, while they were celebrating a christening-feast, the wolves, messengers of our Lord, came, took that horse out of the stable, and led him to the fields of Paradise."

They wondered exceedingly at the narrative, and were greatly exercised, thinking how the Lord always punishes

evil and rewards good deeds, and watches carefully over all things, as this tale about the horse clearly showed.

"Not even the worm that bores in this wall is hidden from His eyes."

"Nor even," Roch swiftly added, "is any most secret thought concealed from Him, nor any foul desire."

Yagna started at the words; for Antek had just come in, though noticed by few. Valentova was at the time relating such wonders about an enchanted princess, that the spindles ceased from turning, and all sat motionless, listening in charmed silence.

And thus they spent that bleak February evening.

All their minds were on fire, and blazed like roaring resinous faggots; murmurs of emotional outbursts—fancies, dreams, desires—fluttered about the cabin like butterflies—living, flying flowers.

They wove themselves such a web of marvels—so bright with changing prismatic hues—that for the moment it quite shut out the sad, grey, miserable world they lived in.

They went a-roaming over dark plains, lit up with phantom lights; by silver streams, where eerie songs and mysterious calls and gurgling ripples resounded; through vast woods, full of glamour—of knights, of giants, of castles haunted by spectres, of dragons breathing flames. They stood horror-struck at those crossways where vampires screech with laughter; where they that have hanged themselves utter the sobs of the lost; and where the souls of unchristened children flit and hover on bats' wings. They wandered through dim burying-places, following the shades of such as do penance for self-murder; they listened to uncanny voices in ruins of castles and churches; saw fearful visions of terror pass by in endless procession; were present at battles fought; and looked beneath the waters, where the swallows sleep together in long festoons, to be waked each springtime at the Blessed Virgin's call, who gives them to the world again!

Heaven and hell they passed through—through the dark shadows of the wrath of God, and through the radiance of

His tender mercy; through ineffable regions and times of raptures, marvels, miracles; through worlds never seen but in hours of ecstasy, or in dreams—when man looks and gazes, is dizzy and spellbound, and knows not whether he is still in this world or in the next!

It was then that, like an ocean before them, there arose an impassable barrier—a barrier of enchantments and bright wonders—between them and the real world, making it fade away, with the cabin, and the thick black night—this world of troubles, miseries, wrongs, tears, unfulfilled desires—and opening their eyes to that other world, far more majestic and beautiful than tongue can tell!

They had entered the world of the Fabulous; the life of the Fabulous surrounded them with its rainbow tints; the fables of Dreamland had become realities for them. They were dying with a rapture in which they yet found a new life—the great new life, abounding and sacred, merged and plunged in the Miraculous: wherein all trees speak, all stones are animated, all woods enchanted, and every sod of ground instinct with unknown force: wherein all things great and invisible and superhuman live their life—the sublime life of the Inconceivable.

With uttermost longing and a yearning of ecstasy did they aspire towards that life, uniting all things with its infrangible chain—fancy and reality, prodigy and wishes—in a bewildering procession of dream-existences, for which, under the miserable conditions of their earthly days, their weary crippled souls were insatiably pining.

And indeed, what was that life of theirs, so dull, so squalid? what was that daily round of deeds, so like the glances of a sick man, veiled in the mists of suffering?—Mere darkness—a sad tedious night, during which, except at the hour of death, no such marvels were ever to be seen with the bodily eyes.

As a beast of burden beneath the yoke, so livest thou, O man! caring only to get through this thy present day, and never thinking of what surrounds thee—what incense-

perfumes—and from what most sacred altars—fill the world—nor what hidden prodigies are lurking everywhere!

O man! thou seest no more than doth a rock beneath deep waters! O man! who in darkness ploughest the field of life, thou sowest it but with tears and trouble and sorrow!

And this thy starlike soul, O man! thou lettest it wallow in the marsh and the quagmire! . . .

The conversation went on, and Roch willingly joined in it, always full of wonder and sorrow and tears, when others wondered and sorrowed and wept. . . .

From time to time, there would be long pauses, in which you might almost hear the throbbing of hearts ready to burst, and you could see how their moist eyes glistened, shining with dewy tears; while exclamations of wonder and longing arose, and their souls knelt down before the Lord, in this His temple of marvels, and sang the great hymn of thanksgiving. This all their hearts were singing, filled with ecstasy, trembling, in the mystic communion of the Ideal; like the earth, when it thrills in spring beneath the sunbeams; like the waters at evening, when the day is calm and quiet, and vibrations and iridescent tints play all over them; or like the young corn in an afternoon of early May, murmuring continuously and gently waving delicate blades and feathery ears in a prayer of thanks.

Yagna was in heaven. So deeply did she feel and realize all these things that they stood before her in concrete form and shape, and she was able to cut them out in paper without any difficulty. They handed her some sheets, written over by the children whom Roch was teaching; and while she listened to the legends and stories, she snipped out, now spectres, now kings, or vampires, or dragons, or any other wonderful things, so well cut that they were recognized without fail. So many did she cut out that a whole beam might have been pasted over with her handiwork; and she painted them all with raddle that Antek passed to her. So absorbed was she in her work and the legends she was listening to, that

she failed to notice him, as he stood there impatient, trying to draw her attention; nor did the others, who were also deeply interested, remark the signs he made.

On a sudden, the dogs outside fell to barking furiously, and howling as if in dread, till one of Klemba's sons went out to them. He said on his return that he had seen a peasant outside the window, who had run away.

No one either paid heed to what he had said or remarked that later, when the dogs had ceased barking, a face passed swiftly outside the window, and vanished. Only one girl saw it, and screamed out, rolling her eyes in terror.

"Someone has just gone by—there—there—in the yard!"

"Yes, I hear feet scrunching through the snow!"

"And there's a scraping noise along the wall!"

"'Talk of the wolf . . . it is sure to appear!'"

A panic came over them, and now they sat terror-struck, motionless with dread.

"Ah!" someone said in a terrified whisper, "we were speaking of the Evil One—and perhaps we have called him up—and he may even now be on the watch for one of us!"

"Jesu Maria!" they exclaimed in horror.

"Just take a look outside, boys, will you? 'Tis but the dogs playing about in the snow."

"Oh, but I saw him too plain through the window—his head as big as a barrel, and eyes like burning coals!"

"Ye saw not well," said Roch, and, seeing that no one cared to go into the yard, he went himself to calm them.

"I will tell you a tale about the Blessed Virgin," he said on his return, "and all your fancies will vanish away." He seated himself in his former place; his coolness somewhat quieted them.

"It was long, long ago, ages ago; so long ago that the tale is found only in very ancient books. In a certain village, hard by Cracow, there dwelt a free peasant, Casimir by name, and surnamed 'the Hawk.' His family, a good one, had dwelt there from all time, and he tilled many a thirty-five-acre piece of land. He had a forest of his own,

a dwelling like a manor, and water-mill close to the river. Our Lord had blessed him, and all went well with him; his barns were always full of corn as his money-box was of money; his children were blooming, his wife was without reproach, and he himself a wise and kindly man, not proud of heart, and just towards everyone.

"He ruled like a father in the assembly, always for justice, anxious to be upright in all things, and ever the first to help and save his neighbours.

"So he lived, soberly, quietly and happily, as one having the Lord God at his fireside.

"Now one day the King sent to call the nation to war against the Paynim.

"The Hawk was sorely troubled at heart, for he had no wish to leave his home and go out to the wars.

"But then, there was the King's messenger standing at the door, and calling him to hasten.

"It was a very great war. The Turks, a vile brood! had entered Poland, burning villages, robbing churches, slaying priests, and putting the people to death, or driving them, bound with cords, to their own country of infidels.

"To fight them was a duty. If, to defend his home and kin, men and country, a man shall willingly lay down his life, he is sure of eternal salvation.

"So he called the assembly, selected the stoutest and bravest men he could find; and on the morrow, after Holy Mass, all set out, some on horseback, others in chariots.

"The whole village went with him, with tears and great lamentations, as far as the statue of Our Lady of Chenstohova, which stands by the road, at the crossway.

"He fought for a year, for two years . . . but at last no news of him came any more.

"And when all the others had been back a long time, the Hawk was still far away. So they thought he must have been either slain or taken captive by the Turks; moreover, the *Dziads* and wanderers who passed by said secretly much that made them think so.

"At length, at the end of the third year, he came back one day in early spring; but all alone, without henchmen or horses or chariots, in great poverty, and bearing a staff like a beggar.

"He knelt down before the statue of the Blessed Virgin, thanking her for his return to his own country; then he made for the village, walking with swift steps.

"But none welcomed him, none knew who he was; and the dogs attacked him, and he drove them off.

"He arrived at his home . . . rubbed his eyes . . . crossed himself . . . and knew not what it meant.

"Jesu Maria!—No granaries, no orchards, no hedges even! and of live stock, not a single head.—Of his cabin, there remained only the scorched and ruined walls.—No children either! All was utterly destroyed. His wife rose at his approach from a pallet of straw where she lay sick and in pain, and she burst into most bitter tears!

"He stood thunder-struck.

"It had come to pass, while he was fighting and putting to flight the enemies of the Lord, that the plague had entered his cabin, and cut off all his children, and the lightning had struck it and burned it down, and the wolves had eaten his cattle. Then his neighbours seized upon his lands, the corn had perished by drought, the rest of the crops by hail-storms: and naught remained to him.

"Down he dropped on the threshold, ghastly as one dead. But when evening fell, and the bell rang for the Angelus, he started up, and began to curse and blaspheme in an awful voice!

" 'Had he shed his blood in God's service for this? for this defended God's churches?'

"In vain his wife tried to calm him; in vain she fell at his feet and entreated him: he continued to curse and blaspheme.

" 'What! had he suffered wounds, and hunger, and been honest and pious for this? No matter what he had been, the Lord God had forsaken him, and decreed he should lose all!'

"Most foully did he curse the name of God, and cry that now he would give himself to Satan, who alone did not forsake the wretches that call upon him.

"At those words, behold, Satan appeared before him!

"The Hawk, being very wroth, was now reckless, and cried out:

" 'O devil, if you can help me, do; for I have been dealt with most grievously!'

"Fool that he was, and unable to understand that this was all but a trial, whereby our Lord would prove him!

" 'I will aid you,' Satan hissed; 'but will you give up your soul to me?'

" 'I will—this instant!'

"So a compact was written, and signed with Casimir's blood.

"From that day forth, all things began to mend. He himself did but little, only ordering and overseeing things. Michalek (for so the devil chose to be called) worked for him, helped by other devils, disguised as farm-servants or as Germans; and in a short time the farm was in better order, larger and more flourishing than it ever had been.

"Only there came no more children to them. For how, indeed, could they come to a home so unblessed as that?

"This mortified the Hawk exceedingly. Also by night he was wrung at the thought how he should support the everlasting fire of hell.

"But Michalek took upon him to say that all rich folk—lords, kings, men of learning, yea, and even such bishops as were mighty on earth—had sold their souls to him. And yet none of them cared for what might come to them after death, and thought only of making merry and tasting all the pleasures of this life to the full.

"Then was Casimir more at ease, and he became a yet greater foe to God. With his own hands, he hewed down the cross by the forest; he cast the holy images out of his cabin, and would even have removed the statue of Our Lady of Chenstohova, because it was in his way when he ploughed. Hardly could his wife, with many prayers and

tears and entreaties, prevail upon him to let it remain.

"The years flew by, like a rapid river. His wealth increased enormously, and his importance along with it; so that the King himself came to see the man, invited him to Court, and gave him the post of chamberlain there.

"Now was he puffed up, and looked down upon all, oppressed the poor, threw honesty to the winds, and cared no whit for anyone in the world.

"He also most foolishly closed his mind against the thought that he must one day pay dearly for all this.

"But at last the hour of reckoning arrived.

"Our Lord's patience and mercy towards that hardened sinner came to an end at last.

"And his doom and punishment swooped down upon him.

"First, he was assailed by sore diseases, which tortured him unceasingly.

"Then the plague swept away all his castle.

"Next, his farm-buildings were struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

"After which, his corn crops were ruined by hail-storms.

"Then such terrible droughts came that everything was withered up and, being dry, burned to ashes; the very ground was cracked and fissured, and his trees died for lack of water.

"All men abandoned him, and Want sat down at his threshold.

"He was exceeding sick, and his flesh fell from off his bones, which began to rot.

"He called for Michalek and his fellow-demons to help him; but without avail. When the hand of the Lord is lifted up in anger against any man, Satan can do nothing.

"Instead of trying to aid him, the fiends, who were sure that he was already theirs, blew fire into his horrible wounds to make them rankle yet more.

"And now, nothing could save him but God's mercy.

"Late in the autumn, there came so windy a night that the gale tore off the roof of the cabin, and all the doors and

windows; and with it there entered a troop of fiends that fell to dancing as they pressed forwards with pitchforks to the middle of the room, where the Hawk lay dying.

"His wife did what she could to protect him. Thrusting a holy image in front of him, and chalking the sign of the cross on the door and windows, she drove them out; but she was most anxious lest he should die unreconciled to God, and without the last sacraments. So, although he had forbidden her, being hardened even at this last hour, and though Satan sought to turn her back, she found an opportunity, and slipped away to where the parish priest lived.

"But he was just driving out, and did not care to attend so wicked a man.

"'God has abandoned him: he needs must belong to Satan: I have nothing to do there.' And off he drove to play cards with the manor-folk.

"Weeping in bitter woe, the woman knelt down before the statue of Our Lady of Chenstohova, and sobbed and besought mercy for him from the bottom of her heart.

"And the Holy Virgin took pity, and spake to her:

"'Woman,' she said, 'weep not: thy prayer is granted.'

"And down she came from the altar, just as she was: crowned with gold, clad in her azure star-besprinkled mantle, and with a rosary dangling at her side . . . she, the Holy Mother, like unto the morning star, all beaming with loving-kindness! The woman fell upon her face before her.

"With her sacred hands she raised her up compassionately, wiped away her tears, and said tenderly:

"'Take me to thy cabin, faithful servant; it may be that I can do something.'

"She looked on the dying sinner, and her merciful heart yearned within her at the sight.

"'Thy husband must not die without a priest: the power to shrive, that priests have received from God, is not mine; for I am but a woman. That priest is an evil-doer, and

cares not for his flock. For that will he answer to God; but he alone can give absolution. . . . I will go myself to the manor and fetch this gambler thence.—Here is my rosary: keep the fiends at bay with it till I come back.'

"But how was she to go? The night was dark, windy, rainy, miry. It was far to go, besides; and moreover, the fiends set up obstacles everywhere to prevent her.

"Our Heavenly Lady dreaded none of these things. She only muffled herself in a sheet of coarse drugget against the foul weather, and went out into the darkness.

"Exhausted and quite drenched, she arrived at the manor, knocked at the door, and humbly begged the priest to come to a sick man; but, supposing her to be some poor woman, and knowing how stormy it was out of doors, he sent her word that he would come next day, being too busy just then. So he went on playing, drinking, and enjoying himself with the gentlemen there.

"Our Lord's Mother sighed deeply at his evil behaviour; but, causing a gilded coach and horses and servants to appear at once, she went into the room, arrayed in the garb of a castellan's lady.

"Of course the priest set out with her at once and very eagerly.

"They arrived, but only just in time; the man was almost at his last gasp, and the fiends were making efforts to rush in and carry him alive to hell, before the priest arrived with the Sacred Host.

"The Hawk confessed, repented, was shriven, and gave up the ghost. Our Lady herself closed his eyes; then, when she had blessed his widow, she turned to the bewildered priest and said:

" 'Follow thou me!'

"He did so, ever more and more amazed; but, looking out of the cabin-door, saw neither coach nor servants—only rain, mire, darkness—and Death dogging each of his steps! Mightily afraid, he followed our Lady to the chapel.

"Then he beheld her, now in her mantle and crown, sur-

rounded with a choir of angels, as she again took her place upon the altar.

"Then he knew her for the queen of Heaven, and was terrified. Falling on his knees, he wept aloud, and begged her to have mercy.

"But the Blessed Virgin eyed him with indignation, and said:

"Many a century shalt thou kneel here in penance for thy sins, ere thou hast atoned for them!'

"And immediately he turned into stone, and remained in that posture, weeping every night, holding out his hands to her, and awaiting the hour of pardon. Thus has he been kneeling for ages and ages.

"Amen! . . .

"Even at the present day, that same priest is to be seen in Dombrova. The stone figure stands outside the church, in perpetual memory of the fact, and as a warning to all sinners."

All listened with attention; all were subdued, filled with wonder, awed and silenced.

For what could they say at such a moment—when the soul, expanding like the iron which glows red-hot in the fire, is so flooded with emotion and splendour that one has but to strike upon it, and it shoots forth a starry shower, becoming, as it were, a rainbow suspended between earth and heaven?

And so they remained, hushed and silent, until the glow that then filled them had dwindled and faded away.

Matthew took out his flute, and the touch of his cunning fingers brought forth the anthem, "To Thy Protection, Holy Mother of God . . ." with its touching, measureless, opalescent melody, like gossamer-besprinkled dew-drops; and they all, in low voices, took up the anthem after him.

And then, little by little, one by one, they went back to their everyday mood and talk.

After a time the young people smiled and laughed; for Teresa, the soldier's wife, was asking them funny riddles.

In a while, someone coming in said that Boryna was back from the law-court, and drinking in the tavern with his companions: at which Yagna quickly and quietly slipped out. Antek slipped out too, catching up with her at the outer entrance on the very threshold; he seized her hand fast, and led her on to the outer yard, and through the orchard, beyond the barns and granaries.

CHAPTER XI

PAST the orchard, gliding swiftly, stooping forward as they went under the snow-laden boughs, they ran like frightened deer along by the barns and into the murky snow-plain, into the starless night, into the unfathomable stillness of the frozen waste.

So, speeding on, swallowed up by the shadows, they presently forgot all the rest of the world. Each, with arm round the other's waist, seized in a tight grasp, ran along with rapid steps, bending down, hip to hip—rejoicing, yet with fear, silent, yet with hearts full of song—athwart the bluish livid obscurity which enveloped them.

"Yagna?"

"Dearest?"

"Are you really here?"

"Can you doubt it?"

They said no more, and were at times forced to stop and take breath.

Unable to speak for the throbbing of their hearts, and forced besides to suppress their feelings, which else would have burst out in a wild cry, they only glanced at one another; their eyes darted still but ardent lightnings, and lips flew to lips in an impetuous rush, and with such hungry ravenous craving that they both reeled in ecstasy, panted for breath, feeling the earth crumble beneath their feet, as it were, while they fell into a fiery abyss—and, looking at one another with eyes blinded by those flames, saw nothing more!—And again they would dash forward—whither, they could not tell: only longing to be farther, farther away—plunged in the murkiest possible shadows, in the thickest intricacy of gloom.

One more field passed—and yet another! Farther and

deeper still—till nothing more was seen—till they could forget the whole world, and their own existence, and enter the realm of Fairyland, lost as in some strange dream, like to the marvellous waking vision which they had had but now, in Klemba's hut!—And, indeed, they still felt the influence, luminous in its vagueness, of those mystic legends they had heard breathed low; they still were attuned to the diapason of wonders and of miracles; and those same fantastic myths were pouring a shower of unearthly blossoms into their souls: entrancement, awe, intense stupefaction, intoxicating bliss, unappeasable desire!

Yes, they were yet wrapped in that rainbow-coloured mantle of marvellous ideal happenings; still, so to speak, they followed in the wake of the wonderful pageant they had seen go by; they traversed strange fabulous lands, and went through all those superhuman scenes and actions, all those wonders, those enchantments, those magical spells. They beheld visions, swaying in the dark, floating along the sky, expanding as they looked, and touching their hearts with such telling power that they could not breathe for dread, but stood pressed close one to the other, mute, terror-struck, and gazing into the opaque bottomless depths of their dreams. And their minds would then blossom forth into the blossoms of fantasy—the beautiful flowers of faith and loving rapture . . . and they sounded the extremes of admiration and oblivious joy.

Then, returning to earth once more, they would search the night with bewildered eyes, scarce knowing in which world they were, whether those marvels had been realized, or were all mere phantoms and creations of the brain.

"Say, Yagna, are you not afraid?"

"I? I would go with you to the very end of the world—die with you!" she whispered with energy, pressing very close to him.

"Were you waiting there for me?" he asked after a while.

"Dearest, at every opening of the door, I expected you! I went there only for you; and how I feared you would fail to come!"

"Yet, when I came, ye feigned not to see me!"

"Nonsense. Should I look, with folks' eyes upon me?—Ah, there was that within me which yearned so, I wonder I did not fall off my seat in a swoon."

"Sweetest!"

"You sat behind me, and I knew it; but I feared to look round—feared to speak: all the time my heart went pit-a-pat, and beat so loud, I think folk must have heard."

"I thought to find you at the Klembas', and to leave with you."

"I meant to run straight home . . . but ye constrained me . . ."

"Against your will? Say, Yagna!"

"Nay . . . more than once . . . I thought that this might come to pass!"

"Did you think so? Did you think so?" he whispered, in a passion of love.

"Surely, Antek.—And besides . . . there . . . continually . . . beyond the stile . . . it was not well with us."

"True.—Here, none will disturb us. We are alone."

"Aye, alone! And how thick this darkness is!" she murmured, throwing her arms about his neck, and embracing him with all the vehemence of her passionate soul.

Now there was no longer any wind; only a slight breeze which from time to time caressed and cooled their burning faces. Neither stars nor moon were visible: the sky was louring, covered with thick clouds as with a ragged fleece, and dark-brown as a herd of oxen upon a bare waste field. Things loomed dimly afar, as if seen through expanses of drab smoke, as if the whole world were but a tissue of fogs, of darkness rolling around on every side, of seething murk.

A movement in the air—an uneasy vibration, scarce to be felt, seemed floating forth from the forests, lost in the night.

It was very dark: in the atmosphere, thrilled with a dreary and ominous agitation, they were aware of a dull eerie motion, of strange indefinite vibrations, of vague fearful mutterings and lurking shapes that had no shape! Sometimes,

on a sudden, feebly gleaming from out the voluminous dusk, there appeared the spectral pallor of the snow-fields; and a few glimmers—chilly, moist, viscous glimmers—would coil and uncoil in snaky folds across the shadows; and again the night would shut her eyelids fast, and the darkness descended with a black impenetrable downpour, in which all things were lost. The eye, no longer able to perceive anything, now sounded the uttermost abyss of this portentous invisibility, whose dull sepulchral deadness benumbed and overwhelmed the mind.—But at times the veil of obscurity was rent in twain, as by some mighty force, and through that tremendous rift one could see the black-hue expanse of heaven, serene and studded with stars.

And now—was it from fields or from huts? from the sky above, or from the gloom-drowned horizons?—who can say? . . . but there came . . . trembling . . . muttering . . . slinking . . . what? voices, gleams, scarce audible echoes—call them what you will: the ghosts of things and sounds long ago dead and gone, now haunting the world again, seemed moving to and fro in a ghastly procession, expiring far away, as the light of a star may expire in the abyss.

But these two paid little heed to all this. Within them there raged a tempest; every minute it grew and grew, rolling from heart to heart in a hurricane of hot unspoken desires, of flashing glances, of shuddering pangs, of scorching kisses, of words as stammering and incoherent and inarticulate as is the thunder in the sky: of instants as mute as death, of fondness so excruciating that they choked each other with caresses, and their hugs gave them intense pain, while they struggled to hurt and to be hurt for the delight of that pain; and their eyes filmed over, and they could no longer see anything at all!

Swept onward by the wild blast of their passion, blinded to everything, maddened even to frenzy, forgetful of all, and burning with the same mutual flame, they had, in that night of palpable darkness, fled out into the loneliness of

the silent waste, about to give themselves to each other entirely, "till death did them part," and from the very bottom of their souls that were starving with the insatiable hunger of unfulfilled desire.

They were by this time unable to speak, save for a few instinctive cries that welled out of their inmost being—a few strangled whispers, thrown forth as spasmodically, as fitfully, as the flames of a fire—rambling, raving, insane words—with hungry devouring looks, looks of frenzy mixed with haggard terror, looks that betrayed the storm that raged within.—Till at last there swept over him and her a convulsion so irresistible, such an uncontrollable spasm of craving, that, losing their senses completely, they closed with a mad frantic cry . . . and fell!

And, with them, their whole world reeled and crashed headlong into the abyss!

"Oh, I am beside myself!"

"Be silent, dear, be silent!"

"I cannot; else I should go mad!"

"My heart is bursting asunder!"

"And my blood burns my veins!"

"Death—is it death coming—or a swoon?"

"My own, my own!"

"O Antek!"

. . . . . .

Even as those elements which combine to form life wake up in the early months of every year, and—impelled by eternal affinity—set out to seek one another throughout the world, from end to end of earth and sky, until they meet in springtime, and unite, and bring forth to our astonished eyes now flowers, now babes, now huge green trees that murmur in the wind:

So they too, after long days of desire and torment, days of greyness and of void, met, found each other, mingled with an uncontrollable cry, rushing into one another's arms, and clinging close: Just so may two pine-trees, uprooted by the storm and tossed together in a desperate embrace, strive

with might and main, wrestling in a mortal grip, whirling, reeling, rebounding—till they both drop to the ground and die!

And over these two did the night weave her veil of shadows, that the things which were to be might come to pass.

. . . . . .

Somewhere among those shadows, partridges were heard to pipe, so near at hand that the passage of the whole covey was distinctly audible. A quick rustling sounded—wings flapping the snow for an upward flight. Other noises, keen and shrill, broke the stillness now and then; and from the village that therefore could hardly be very far away, there came the loud though muffled crowing of cocks.

"It must be late," she whispered timidly.

"Oh, it is yet long before midnight: 'tis only change of weather makes them crow."

"A thaw is setting in."

"Aye, the snow is softer now."

Some hares, not far from the rock under which they were sitting, then fell to squeaking, playing about and gambolling merrily; and presently a whole band of them darted by, so near them that they shrank in alarm.

"'Tis pairing-time; the little beasts are so excited that they fear nothing. . . . Spring will soon be here."

"I thought some large creature was rushing at us!"

"Hush!" he hissed in sudden terror. "Crouch low!"

They silently crept close to the rock. Out of the dusk, less black because of the reflecting snow, appeared long shadows, stalking some prey, advancing slowly, slowly, pressed close to the ground, and sometimes completely vanishing—swallowed up, as it were, by the earth; their eyes alone shining greenly phosphorescent, like glow-worms in a copse. The creatures were about forty yards away, but soon farther, disappearing into the darkness. . . . And then, all at once, came the throttled scream of a hare in mortal jeopardy . . . a scraping and a scuffling of feet . . . a rattle and a snarl, the sound of crunched bones, a fierce growling;

and then once more silence, deep and dreadful, prevailed all around.

"Wolves.—Tearing a hare piecemeal."

"If they had scented us!"

"They could not: the wind blows towards us."

"I am afraid. Let us go. I feel cold as ice," she said with a shudder.

He took her in his arms. She warmed to his kisses, and oblivion of all things came over them once more. With one arm tight round the other's waist, they both went along their straggling way, swinging and bending to and fro, as trees do, when, too heavily laden with blossoms, they wave restfully to the gentle hum of bees.

They spoke rarely; but their kisses and sighs and passionate ejaculations, their low blissful murmurs and rapturous heart-beats, vibrated above them and around, as the warm air trembles and quivers over a field in springtime. For now they were like those vast plains all in flower, plunged in the radiance and harmony of joy; thus did they glow, with eyes like opening buds; thus did their souls echo back the hot perfumes of meadows basking in the sunbeams, the shimmering of brooks, the low faint twittering of birds. Their beating hearts were in unison with those spring-tide regions; and the words they uttered—few, full of meaning, and scarce audible—welled forth from their innermost souls, as young shoots burst from the parent tree at the dawn of a May morning; their breaths were like the zephyrs that fondle the sprouting corn, and their souls like a day in the spring season—sunny as the rising blades of wheat, and not less full of the songs of larks, of brightness, of whispering, of dazzling virescence, and the irresistible gladness of life!

Then again they grew silent and stopped short, seized with awe of something they knew not what, which was about to be: as when a cloud floats over the sun, and the world at once waxes still and sad, and darkens with uneasy misgiving.

But they soon shook off this mood, and joy again burst out in their bosoms with a great conflagration; glee once

more swept the chords of their hearts, and now they were flying up with bliss, compelled to soar.—And, all unwittingly, they burst out into passionate and delirious song.

They swayed to the rhythm of their voices, which rose as on many-coloured pinions, and sped through the dead stillness of the night in a star-seeking, fiery rush.

And now, completely beside themselves, they strode along, each leaning on the other, driven on by a blind impulse, lost in their mutual love, oblivious of all things, entranced by the spell of a superhuman emotion, which lifted them up to the topmost heights of entrancement, and forced its way out in that timeless, formless, almost wordless chant of theirs!

A wild and a stormy chant it was, rushing torrentially out of their burning hearts, and pouring forth into the world with its all-conquering strain of love!

How it flamed in the sombre chaos of the night! How it lit up the wilds like a bush burning in the desert!

Now it was like the dull and ponderous growl of the waters, when they arise in their strength, and shatter their icy bonds.

Now it was scarce to be heard—a sweet melodious whisper, sounding and rustling faintly, like corn that waves in the sunshine!

And, after a while, it resembled the lay of frightened birds that rise to the sun on frenzied fluttering wings, and at last (their bosoms expanded with soaring up towards those infinite heights) utter forth the triumphant hymn of the earth, the immortal cry of life and existence!

"Yagna!" Antek whispered, as if surprised to know she was by his side.

"Here I am."—But her reply seemed subdued and sorrowful.

They were now upon the pathway that skirted the village, at some distance outside of the encircling granaries, but on the side next to Boryna's farm.

All at once, Yagna burst out crying.

"Why, what is amiss?"

"I cannot tell: something has come over me, and forced the tears to start."

Greatly distressed, he made her sit down with him close to a granary with outstanding beams; there he gathered her tenderly in his arms, rocking her on his breast like a child. Her tears continued to flow, as dew distilling from flowers; he wiped them away, but they still flowed on.

"Are you afraid of anything?"

"Of what, pray? Only within me there waxes a stillness as though Death stood here beside me; yet all the while something lifts me up, so that I would fain climb the sky, and sail away among the clouds."

He replied nothing. The light had all at once gone out of their souls; a shadow passing over them troubled their calm and bore in upon them a strange sense of longing, which made them cling yet closer one to the other, and seek yet more earnestly to find mutual support, each vying with the other in the desire to flee away into some unknown world.

The wind rose; the trees rocked in ghastly wise, covering them both with moist snow; the close-pressed louring clouds began to fall swiftly asunder and roll away, while a low tremulous moan floated across the fields.

"'Tis late, 'tis late; we must run home," she whispered, half rising.

"Do not fear: people are not yet asleep: I can hear them on the road.—Coming back from Klemba's, belike."

"But I left the food-tubs in the byre; the kine may break their legs on them."

The voices they heard grew louder and then fainter again and more remote, while they stood silent. But on one side of them—on the very same pathway, it seemed—the snow crunched crisply, and a tall shadow came out of the gloom, showing so plain that they both started to their feet.

"Someone is there, skulking behind that hedge!"

"That's mere fancy: night-clouds often throw such moving shadows."

They peered long into the darkness, listening intently.

"Come," he then whispered to her, "let us go to the haystack: we shall be more at ease there."

Looking round anxiously every now and then, they held their breath as they stopped to listen; but all was as still as death. So on they went, stooping forward cautiously, till they got to the haystack, and disappeared in the deep opening that yawned just above the ground.

. . . . . .

All was pitch-dark again; the clouds had come together, forming an impenetrable mass: the pale starlight was quenched, and the night, closing its eyes, had fallen into a deep sleep. The stillness grew yet more intense, more awful, broken only by the waving of the snow-burdened trees, and the water babbling under the mill-wheels far, far away.

But after a long interval, the snow upon the road crackled once more beneath steps—still, stealthy steps like the tread of a wolf. A shadow passed along, close to the walls, and, crouching down, made its way through the snow, ever nearer and nearer. . . . It grew larger . . . stopped many a time, to go forward again . . . passed round the hayrick on the outer side and, creeping up to the opening, listened long and closely.

Then it went away to the stile, and vanished among the trees.

About a minute afterwards, it appeared again, bearing a truss of straw. It stopped, listened awhile, and then, springing forward to the haystack, thrust the truss of straw into the hole, rammed it in tight . . . and struck a match. Instantly the straw was in flames and shot out many a blazing tongue, which presently burst into a sheet of red fire, spreading all over one side of the rick.

And Boryna, pitchfork in hand, head lowered, stood there watching, white as a sheet!

They at once realized their position; a ruddy glow already lit the darkness of the den where they lay, and a pungent smoke filled the air. They beat wildly about on one side and another, finding no issue, maddened with horror, and scarcely able to breath. But, by marvellous good luck,

Antek happened upon the tarpaulin cover and, pushing with all his might, tore it down, falling to the ground along with it. Ere he could rise, Boryna was upon him with pitchfork raised to pin him to the earth. He missed: Antek leaped up and, before the old man could aim a second thrust, felled him with a blow of his fist in the chest—and fled.

Boryna, up in an instant, rushed to the haystack; but Yagna too was no longer there, having slipped out and disappeared in the night. And then, in the voice of one raving mad with rage, he roared out: "Fire! Fire!" and ran round the hayrick, wielding his pitchfork, and looking for all the world like a fiend in the blood-red glow. . . . —The fire had by now got complete hold of the stack—hissing, humming, roaring, and raising on high its pillar of flame and of smoke.

Folk came along in haste; the cry of "Fire!" had quickly spread through the village. Someone had rung the alarm-bell, and every heart was throbbing with fear. But the flame of the conflagration rose ever higher and higher, waving its fiery mantle from side to side, and raining a torrent of red sparks over all the buildings, both near it and throughout the whole village.

CHAPTER XII

THE morrow which followed that memorable night was full of great excitement; and all Lipka swarmed like an ant-hill when a naughty boy has thrust a stick into it.

Dawn had scarcely risen, people had but just begun to rub their eyes and wake up, when they all of one accord made their way to the scene of the fire. Some even said their prayers as they went, to save time, and hurried along as to a fair.

The day rose, blurred as with mist; for the snow, coming down in great soft flakes, threw its wet ragged cloak over everything. That, however, no one minded; all gathered in groups, and stood for hours together on the spot, talking in low tones about the events of the night, and pricking up their ears to get at any new detail that might offer.

The rick was in ruins—so completely burned down that nothing had been left standing save the two supports it had been built upon. And these too were like half-burnt-out brands. The thatch had also been torn from the sties and the shed, down to the very girders. The pathway and neighbouring land were, for half the length of a field, covered with burnt thatch, splinters of laths, ashes of straw, bits of charred wood.

The snow continued to fall, and after a time overspread everything with a glistening sheet, which the glowing embers had thawed in places. Here and there, too, there issued streams of smoke or even pale hissing flames from heaps of hay that had been pulled from the rick, which the men set to work upon with hedge-bills, stamping out the flames with their clogs, beating the hay with sticks, and heaping it over with snow.

They were just at work on one of those smouldering heaps, when a lad fished out a charred rag and held it aloft.

" 'Tis Yagna's apron!" Kozlova sneered; for they all knew what had taken place, or guessed it shrewdly.

"Search well, lads; ye may also find a pair of hose."

"Oh, no! he carried them off unscathed . . . unless he lost them by the way!"

"The lasses have been after them all the time, but someone was too quick and got them first."

"Silence, babblers!" the Soltys shouted indignantly. "Come ye to make merry here, and grin over your neighbour's misfortune?—Off, women! get you home; what do ye, standing here?"

"Meddle not with our business, but do your own; for that only are ye in office!" Kozlova retorted in such shrill tones of anger that the Soltys looked her in the face, spat with disgust, and withdrew to the farm-yard. No one moved an inch; and the women set to pushing the singed apron about with their clogs, and confer together in fierce tones.

"Such a one," Kozlova said aloud, "should be treated as witches were dealt with of old—driven out from amongst us with a lighted candle and an oven-poker!"

"Surely! Has not all this befallen through her fault?" chimed in Sikora's wife.

"It is," put in Sohova gently, "a mercy of the Lord that the whole village has not been burnt down!"

"True: a miracle, a miracle indeed."

"Yes; there was no wind, and they gave the alarm at once."

"Besides, the alarm-bell was rung, and we were only in our first sleep."

"It is likely the bear-leaders, who were coming from the tavern, were the first to see it."

"Ah, no, my dear! Boryna caught them inside the haystack, and had only just separated them, when the fire broke out. Last night, when I saw them at the Klembas', going out together, I was sure something of the sort would happen."

"The old man had long been on the watch to catch them."

"My son tells me he had been walking about outside Klemba's ever so long, waiting for them," Kobusova remarked.

"Antek must have set the rick on fire out of spite."

"Did he not threaten he would do so?"

"It could not but have ended in some such way; it could not," Kozlova put in.

Meanwhile, another group of housewives were also whispering, but lower and to more purpose.

"Do you know? Boryna has swinged Yagna so, that she is now lying sick in her mother's house!"

"Certainly; he turned her out at dawn, and sent her chest with all her things after her," Balcerek's wife, who had hitherto said nothing, told them now.

Ploshka's wife contradicted her:

"Pray do not talk at random; I was in the hut just now, and her chest is standing there.

"But," she added in a higher key, "on her wedding-day I foretold it would come to this."

"O my God!" Sohova groaned, raising her open hands, "what an awful, awful thing!"

"Ah, well, he will be locked up for it, and that's all!"

"It is but just: we might all have been burnt out."

"I," said Ploshka's wife, "was beginning to enjoy my first sleep, when Luke, who had been running about with the bear-leaders, came tapping at my window-pane and crying: 'Fire!'—Jesu Maria! the window was as red as hot embers. . . . And I felt so faint, I could not budge one inch. . . . And the bell tolled, and the people shrieked . . ."

Here someone broke in: "No sooner had I heard there was a fire at Boryna's than I knew it was Antek's doing."

"Tush, ye talk as though ye had seen him do it."

"Seen him I have not; but all say it is he."

"Why, Yagustynka has been whispering something of the sort for ever so long."

"Of course they will put him in the stocks, and then in prison."

"But," cried Balcerkova, whose pride was that she knew the law, "what can they do to him? Who has seen the man? What witnesses are there?"

"Well, but did not Boryna catch him in the act?"

"Yes; but not in *that* act.—Besides, even had it been that, his testimony is worthless, because he is at odds with his son!"

"After all, 'tis the court's business, not ours; but who, before God and man, is guilty of it all, if not that foul wench Yagna?" Balcerkova continued sternly, raising her voice.

"You say true!—Ah, such wickedness, such depravity!" they assented, speaking lower and thronging closer, as they recounted her former misdeeds.

Little by little, their voices rose loud in condemnation of Yagna's behaviour. All the old offences which had caused their hatred, now again returned to their minds: a shower of epithets, reproaches, threats, and evil spiteful words, were hurled at her; and their fury was so hot that, had she appeared among them at that instant, she would surely have been attacked and beaten.

The men, on the other side, were discussing Antek, more calmly, but not with less animosity. Every heart was full of indignation and bitterness. More than one fist was shaken with dangerous menace, more than one word of harsh import flew about. Even Matthew, who had been on his side at first, forsook him now, only saying:

"Well, if the man had dared to attempt such a thing, he must needs be out of his mind."

Thereupon the blacksmith entered the lists, speaking loud, with furious passion, and pointing out to them that Antek had long ago threatened his father he would burn him down; that Boryna had known of his threats, and been in the habit of keeping watch every night.

"Yes, I could take my oath it was he that did it.—Besides, there are witnesses who will speak; he must—he must be punished! Was he not always plotting with the farm-

hands, setting them against their betters, egging them on to evil deeds?—Yes, and I know," he cried in threatening tones, "I know more than one of these—I see them here before me, and they hear me speak . . . and yet they dare to stand up for such a scoundrel—one who taints the whole place! . . . To prison, to Siberia with the wretch! What—with his own stepmother! Was not that crime heinous enough, without adding to it arson besides? 'Tis a wonder any of us is yet alive!" . . . And so he went on, shrieking and shouting so vehemently that he might be guessed to have a purpose in doing so.

Roch, who stood with Klemba not far off, took good note of this, and said:

"Ye make a mighty uproar against him, yet ye were drinking with him in the tavern only yesterday!"

"Whoso would beggar all the village is my foe!"

"And yet," Klemba gravely remarked, "the Squire is no foe of yours!"

The smith then strode off amongst the people, stirring them up, calling them to take revenge, and laying unheard-of offences to Antek's account; and his hearers, already greatly moved, were presently wrought to the very highest pitch of rage. Some began to cry that the incendiary ought to be seized, fettered, and taken to the police-court; while others, of yet more fiery mettle (those especially whose ribs had in days past felt Antek's cudgel), were now looking for sticks, intending to drag him from his cabin and give him such a thrashing as he would remember to his dying day.

The clamour grew, with cries, threats, curses, and a hullabaloo so great that the folk swayed hither and thither like a spinney in a gale, rolling to and from the palings of the enclosure, and preparing to pour out through the gate into the road. The Voyt came to pacify them, but without avail; nor did the Soltys and the elders of the village succeed any better. Their voices were lost in the uproar, and they were themselves swept away by the torrent. No one heeded what they said: everyone dashed on, tore along, and shouted

with all the force of his lungs: the whole band, carried forward by a tempest of hate, appeared like men possessed.

At that moment, Kozlova elbowed her way forward, vociferating:

"There are two culprits: let both be dragged to the place of their crime and judged there!"

The married women, especially the poorest of all, took up the cry with a hideous bellow and, with arms stretched forth, placed themselves by her side. The mob rolled on with the din of a raging torrent.

The howling and shrieking grew as they went on, delayed by the narrow fenced road; they all pressed together, surging along, shrieking, shaking their fists, and lurched against one another, glaring with sinister glances; and a savage many-sounding voice, the cry of universal exasperation, burst from them as they hastened on, intent upon their purpose.—Suddenly those in front cried out:

"The priest! the priest!—And with the Sacred Host!"

At this the mob moved uneasily, as if held back by a chain—wavered, spread out upon the road, stopped, and broke up into little groups. A hush fell all at once upon them: they were struck speechless—fell on their knees and, kneeling, bowed down their heads.

It was indeed the priest, coming out of the church, and bearing with him Christ's Body—the holy viaticum. Ambrose walked on in front, ringing a bell and swinging a lantern.

He went swiftly past, and presently, in the eddying snowfall, was seen only as a dim blur outside a frozen window-pane. Then they rose from their knees.

"Going over to Filipka. She was so starved with cold in the forest yesterday that she has been scarce able to breathe since dawn. They say she will not hold out till night."

"He has also been called to Bartek of the saw-mill."

"What's amiss with him?"

"Why, know ye not? A falling tree-trunk has crushed

the man so, that he is not likely ever to be well again." So they whispered—still gazing after the priest, now almost unseen.

Several of the elder dames had joined him to follow in procession, together with a large party of men; and the rest stood uncertain, like a flock of sheep which their dog has headed round. All their resentment had evaporated, the back of the riot was broken, the din ceased. They looked at one another, scratched their heads or mumbled some unconnected words; several were ashamed of themselves, spat on the ground, and slunk off. Part of the crowd thus leaked away like water, creeping through fences and into wayside cabins. Kozlova alone went on ranting in spite of all, and threatening Antek and Yagna; but, seeing himself without adherents, she had a passage of arms with Roch (who had told her certain truths), and then went back to the village. In the end but few remained, watching at the place of the disaster, lest the fire should break out anew.

The blacksmith, too, remained in the farm-yard, much vexed with the course of events. He spoke no more to anyone, but prowled about, prying into holes and corners, and more than once driving Lapa away for persistently following him and barking.

All this time, Boryna was nowhere to be seen. He was, they said, fast asleep under his bed-clothes; and only Yuzka, with eyes red from crying, peeped out of doors for a moment to disappear immediately. Yagustynka did the farm-yard work alone, as waspish that morning as could possibly be. It was no use speaking to her, and after a few answers that stung like nettles, no one cared to try.

Punctually at noon, a clerk and several gendarmes arrived in Lipka. They wrote a great deal, and made much inquiry into the causes of the fire: which made all present take themselves off pretty quickly, fearing to be called as witnesses.

No one was even seen about the roads; but this was because the snow, falling ceaselessly and yet moister than before, was melting ere it touched the earth, and covered the

whole country with a layer of half-liquid slush. But the folk at home were as lively as bees in a hive; that day had brought them an unexpected respite from their work; few did anything at all, and at some farms the cows were lowing over their empty mangers. In every cabin, people were busily discussing the great event, and often someone would pass from hut to hut: old dames especially, wagging eager tongues. So, from hearth to hearth, news went fluttering round like crows; and at windows and front doors, and elsewhere within the enclosures, many an inquisitive face was seen, watching for Antek to appear, going by in the clutch of the law!

Their curiosity increased hourly, still unsatisfied. Every now and then, someone would rush in, with the breathless announcement that the gendarmes were at Antek's; or swore that he had overpowered them, broken his fetters, and got away. And others had other facts at hand, not less sure than these.

One thing was beyond doubt. Vitek had run to the tavern to get vodka, and great volumes of smoke were pouring out of Boryna's chimney: which told of good cheer preparing within.

Then evening came, clerk and gendarmes drove off in the Voyt's britzka.—But Antek was not along with them!

Great was the wonder and disappointment of the village folk. All had expected to see him carried off in chains. It was in vain that they put their heads together to guess what the old man's testimony had been. That only the Voyt and the Soltys knew: and they kept their own counsel. So the village was in a fever of curiosity; and manifold conjectures, some of them quite incredible, were put forth.

The night fell slowly, dark and quiet enough; the snow no longer fell, and there were signs of a slight frost at hand; for a star or two glittered in the sky, and a bleak wind was hardening the wet expanses of snow which began to break underfoot into thin crackling splinters. Lights shone from within the cabins, where the folk, closely crowded, rested

from the emotions of the day and gave rein to yet more conjectures and surmises.

The field was a wide one. Antek had not been arrested: so he was innocent of having burnt the rick. Then who was guilty? Not Yagna, certainly: no one dreamed she was. And as little did anyone think of accusing old Boryna.

So they groped and groped in the dark, quite unable to find any solution of the mystery. There was no hut wherein the question was not debated, nor any where they arrived at the truth. The only outcome of all these debates was that people were no longer set against Antek. Even his enemies' mouths were stopped; and his friends, Matthew amongst them, once more lifted up their voices in his favour. On the other hand, their fierce hatred for Yagna became still more envenomed. With cruel tongues, the women set themselves to deal with her, dragging her as through a wilderness of thorns and briers. Dominikova, too, came in for her share, and no small one either: being all the more spitefully treated, because no one could say what had become of Yagna; her mother had driven all busy-bodies from her door, as one drives away troublesome dogs.

But all unanimously felt profound compassion and sympathy for Hanka, whom they pitied sincerely, and heartily condoled with. Klemba's wife and Sikora had even gone to her that same evening, bearing with them presents in bundles for the poor woman.

Thus that memorable day went by. The next, things were once more as usual. Curiosity and resentment had cooled down, indignation was blunted and subdued: the daily round of work began again, and they bent their necks to the yoke, and accepted the lot which the Lord God had given them.

At times, indeed, people would talk of what had taken place, but more and more seldom now, and ever with less keen interest.

March coming round, the weather grew really intolerable: dark, muggy, dreary, with such deluges of rain and sleet that to stay within doors was almost a necessity. The sun seemed to have lost itself somewhere among those low-lying

masses of cloud, and often did not shine for one second throughout the livelong day. The snows melted, or softened only, taking a dingy greenish hue, like mouldy walls; the furrows were filled with water, and it flooded the lower lands, and the outlying premises of the farms; and during the nights a frost would frequently come and make walking along the slippery roads and paths no easy matter.

And this abominable weather made folks think less and less about the late fire; the more so, because neither Boryna nor Antek nor Yagna excited curiosity by appearing in public. Thus did the event fall into oblivion, as a stone falls into a stream; the water swirls and eddies over it, ripples, breaks, trembles . . . and flows clamly on as before.

And so things went on until Shrove-Tuesday, the last day before Lent.

It was somewhat of a holiday, and since the dawn a good deal of bustling had been going on about the cabins. From well-nigh every home someone had gone to town to get various articles, especially meat—or at least a bit of sausage or fat bacon. Only the very poorest had to be satisfied with a herring (bought on credit from the Jew) with a dish of boiled potatoes and salt.

But, ever since noontide, the wealthier housewives had been frying doughnuts; and the odours of burnt dripping, and baked meats, and other viands yet more alluring, filled the air of the whole place.

Once more did the bear-leaders make their appearance, straying from hut to hut and performing; and the shouts of the lads who accompanied them echoed now from one part of the village, now from another.

And in the evening, when supper was over, the band played in the tavern; everyone that could move his legs hastened thither, caring not one whit for the sleet that had begun pouring down with the twilight.

They enjoyed themselves with particular gusto, because it was the last time dancing was allowed before Eastertide. Matthew played the flute, and Pete (Boryna's man) ac-

companied him on the fiddle, while Yasyek Topsy-turvy performed on the drum.

And all danced with extraordinary life and spirit, until such time as the tolling of the church-bell signified to them that midnight had come—and that the Carnival was over.

At once the band ceased playing, the dances stopped; everyone promptly dispatched what food remained, and all went home—except old Ambrose, who, fairly drunk, stayed singing outside the tavern, according to his wont.

No lights shone anywhere but in Dominikova's cabin; but there, it was said, the Voyt and the Soltys sat in conference till the second cock-crow, to reconcile Yagna and Boryna.

And when the whole village was fast asleep, and the land at rest (the rain having stopped about midnight), they were still deep in conference.

But in Antek's hut there was no joyous Carnival, no quiet sleep, nor any peace at all.

God alone knows, and no human tongue can tell, what passed in Hanka's mind during those long days and nights since she had met her husband outside the hut, when he forced her to go in.

For that same night she had been told all by Veronka.

The agony of it slew her soul within her, and it lay like a naked corpse, horrible in death. For the first day or two, she hardly stirred from her distaff and spinning-gear: though she spun nothing, only moving her hands mechanically, as one in a deathly slumber, gazing within herself, looking on the storm of sufferings that were hers, and on the miserable chaos of burning tears, wrongs borne, injustice suffered. All that time she neither ate nor slept; even her children's cries could not recall her to herself. Veronka had pity on her, and took care of the little ones, and of her old father, too, who—to make matters worse—had fallen ill after that expedition to the forest, and lay upon the top of the baking-oven, moaning low.

Antek, one might say, was never at home, going out at dawn and returning only late at night. But she now felt

herself unable to say a single word to him. It was impossible: her soul, hardened, as it were, in the fire, had become like stone.

Only on the third day did she wake up, as out of a horrible dream. But how changed! Coming back from that trance of death, she was in appearance no longer the same person: grey, faded, wrinkled, many a year older in looks, and now hard and rigid as though she had been carved in wood. Only her eyes glowed, cold and keen; and her lips were set hard.—So thin had she grown that her clothes hung on her as upon a peg.

And thus she came back to life again. Although her former self was now burnt to ashes, she was aware within her soul of a wonderful power that she never had felt before—of a stubborn force of living and fighting, and of the settled certitude that she would overcome at last.

She at once flew to her wailing children, took them in her arms, and well-nigh smothered them with kisses; and she burst with them into a long sweet flood of tears that were a true relief to her, soothing her anguish greatly.

She quickly set the hut in order, and went round to Veronka to thank her for her kindness, and entreat her to forgive the past. They were at once good friends again, which her sister took as a matter of course. Not so the fact—the inexplicable fact—that Hanka never breathed a word of reproach against Antek, or even complained of her own sad fate.

"I feel like a widow now," she said; "I am alone, and must take thought for the little ones and for everything."

That same evening she went to see the Klembas and other acquaintances, and ask them how things were going on at Boryna's, whose words, so lately heard, were ever in her mind.

Instead, however, of going at once to him, she waited a few days more; and it was only when Ash-Wednesday had come round that she put on her best clothes, committed her little ones to Veronka's keeping, and—without even preparing breakfast—made ready to go out.

"Whither away so early?" Antek inquired.

"To the Ash-Wednesday service," she replied, slowly and evasively.

"Will you not get breakfast ready?"

"Get ye to the tavern; the Jew will give you credit still," she could not help answering: the words came out unawares.

He started up, as if he had got a blow; but she went out unheeding.

Now his shouts, his fury, affrighted her no more. He was a stranger, and so remote from her that she was herself astonished. And though, from time to time, something like the last flicker of her old fondness rose up in her heart from embers now covered over and trodden down, she at once quenched them by recalling the memory of her inexpiable wrongs.

When she entered the poplar road, the faithful were just repairing to church.

It was a singularly bright day for the season. The sun was just in the east; the thin surfaces which the night had frozen on the snows had not yet been melted by the thaw. From the thatches there hung strings as of glittering crystal beads; the waters, frozen in the roads and ditches, gleamed like so many mirrors, and the frosted trees sparkled in the sun. In the pure blue sky, there were suspended a multitude of tiny milk-white clouds, that floated in the light like a flock of sheep playing in a great field full of azure flax-blossoms. The air was pure, cold, and so bracing that inhaling it was a pleasure. The whole country-side looked gay, the pools glistened; the snows shone with glassy golden reflection; the children were frisking and sliding about with joyous cries; an old man here and there, propped against a wall, basked in the bright warm rays; even the dogs, as they chased the crows come to pick up food, barked with a merry bark.

But, on entering the church, Hanka passed immediately into an atmosphere of deep, cold, religious silence. A low mass was just being read at the high altar; and the people, devoutly attentive and lost in fervent prayer, formed a dense

crowd in the nave, upon which long streams of light were pouring down.

Hanka cared little to mix with the crowd then. She went into an aisle so gloomy that it had no light at all, save a few ice-cold streaks; for she desired to be alone with her own soul and with God. Down she knelt before a side-altar consecrated to the Assumption and, kissing the pavement, stretched out her arms, fixed her eyes on the sweet face of the "Mother of Mercy," and was soon absorbed in prayer.

And now at last, at the holy feet of her, the "Comforter of the Afflicted," she burst out into complaints, laying bare all the wounds of her soul with the deepest humility and the most boundless trust, and confessing all her sins from the bottom of her heart. Before our Lady—the Mother of the Polish Nation—she truly repented of all her transgressions. For lo! she had sinned, since she had been punished by the Lord Jesus!

"Aye, I have been unkind to my neighbours, I have set myself above them, quarrelled sometimes, and not been cleanly, and have loved good cheer, been lazy in working and slothful in God's service: I have sinned." Such was the fervent cry of her soul, bleeding with contrition, and she prayed most earnestly that God might forgive Antek's most grievous sins. Oh, how, and with what ardour, did she beg for mercy! Even as a fowl which, about to be killed, makes a frantic dash to the window beats at the panes, and pipes in a mournful voice, begging for its poor life!

Her whole frame shook with weeping; and from out of her soul, as from a bleeding wound, there poured a stream of prayers; and her tears, like blood-stained pearls, trickled down and watered the icy pavement.

Mass was over; and the whole congregation, deeply contrite, went forward to the altar railings, there to receive with bended heads the ashes with which the priest, uttering aloud a penitential prayer, crossed their brows as they knelt.

Without awaiting the close of the service, Hanka went

out, greatly strengthened, and full of trust in God's help.

With head erect, she replied to all who greeted her, and —bold and brave at last—met many a curious eye as she went by. But it was not without a quiver of emotion that she at length reached Boryna's enclosure.

Lord! how very long it was since she had been within! And yet, how many a time had she, sorrowfully and from afar, approached to have a glimpse of it! Now she could view all the place—cabin, outhouses, hedges, trees covered with hoar-frost—with eyes as full of affectionate remembrance as if all that had been part and parcel of her own being, of her life!

Her soul was glad and jocund within her. Scarcely had she got to the porch, when Lapa dashed out and jumped upon her, joyfully whining; and then Yuzka came out, astounded, and hardly believing her senses.

"Hanka! Good Lord! Hanka!"

"Yes, it is I: don't you know me?—Is Father in the house?"

"Surely, surely!—Ah, ye have come at last, ye have come, Hanka!" And the little lass fell a-weeping and kissing her hands, just as if she had been her own mother.

The old man, hearing her voice, came out and brought her into the cabin himself, asked about the children and was pained at what she had undergone. She presently became calmer, and told him everything without concealment. But she felt shocked at the change that he too had suffered; for he had aged a good deal, stooped much more, and looked faded and withered and thin. But his face still wore the same expression as of old, and was even full of more grim and dogged determination than before.

They had a long talk; and when, after an hour or so, Hanka prepared to go home, Boryna told Yuzka to make a large bundle of everything they could spare. It turned out to be so large that she could not carry it by herself; so Vitek had to take it on a toboggan. And, as she went out, Boryna thrust several *złoty* into her hands "for salt-money," and said:

"Come hither more often—every day, if ye can. No one knows what may happen to me, so pray look after the house. And Yuzka loves you."

Thereupon she went away, reflecting on his words as she went, and paying but little heed to Vitek's prattle. Yet he was telling her how the Voyt and the Soltys came daily to press Master to be reconciled to Yagna; how Master had even been at his Reverence's, along with Dominikova—who had afterwards conferred with him till very late the night before—and told her all the news he thought would interest her.

She found Antek still at home, repairing his boots. He did not even look up in her direction; but, on seeing Vitek and the pack, he said, tauntingly:

"Come back from begging, I see."

"Beggars have to beg."

But when Vitek came in, Antek, recognizing him, flew into a passion.

"Blood of a dog!—I forbade you to go to Father's!"

"He asked me himself—I went; he offered the things unasked—I accepted.—Am I, are the children, to die of hunger?—To you 'tis indifferent; but I will not have it."

"Take all that back again!" he shouted. "I want nothing from that man."

"You do not: I and the little ones do!"

"Take it back, I say, or I'll take it myself . . . aye, and thrust his charity down his throat to choke him! Do you hear? I'll throw all that stuff out of doors!"

"You dare to try! Lay but a finger on it, and you'll see!" she screamed, catching up the tiny house-mangle, ready to defend, tooth and nail, the things given her. So dangerous did she look, so infuriated, that he shrank back in confusion at this unexpected resistance.

"He has bought you cheap," he growled. "Very cheap. —For a bit of bread, as one lures a dog!"

"You have sold us—and yourself—cheaper still: for Yagna's . . . petticoat!" she burst out.—Antek started, as though stabbed. And then Hanka seemed suddenly to have gone raving mad. In a torrent of words she overwhelmed

him with every wrong he had ever done to her, and with a host of remembrances and grievances she had never yet spoken of; unsparingly, passing over not one single fault or unkindness; beating him so unmercifully with the flail of her speech that, if she could, she would have beaten him to death on the spot.

He stood aghast at her mad rage; and he felt something, too, that was tearing at his heart. With bowed head he listened, dismayed, and a bitter sense of shame burned his soul; then he snatched up his cap and fled out of the hut.

It was long ere he could make out what strange transformation had come over her. As a dog spurned from the door, he ran away, never thinking where he went, to wander about aimlessly, as indeed was his daily custom.

For since that terrible hour of the conflagration, a fearful thing had come into being within him: he was, so to speak, a prey to secret insanity. He no longer went to his work, although the miller had several times sent for him; he did nothing but wander about the country-side, or sit drinking in the tavern, continually revolving in his mind thoughts of bloody vengeance, and his soul was full of nothing else.

He was even indifferent to the suspicions of arson which sullied his name.

"Let anyone dare to utter them to my face . . . let him but dare!" he had cried to Matthew in the tavern, loud enough for all present to hear.

The heifer which remained to him he had sold to a Jew, and drunk the price of it with his associates; for he had now for pot-companions all the riff-raff in Lipka; such vile fellows as, for instance, Bartek Koziol, or Philip (from over the water), Francis, the miller's man, or those, the lowest of all, the jail-birds, Gulbasowa's sons—men always ready for any act of debauchery, always prowling like wolves about the country-side, seeking what they could snap up and barter to the Jew for a few drams. But he cared little what they were: they kept him company, and fawned upon

him as spaniels fawn on their masters. He did indeed give one or another a thrashing now and then; but he willingly stood them drinks and protected them against other folk.

The gang shortly committed so many lawless acts and breaches of the peace that complaints were made every day to the Voyt, and even to his Reverence.

Matthew cautioned him, but unavailingly. Vainly, too, had Klemba, out of pure kindliness, besought him to stop in time, and not ruin his life for ever. He listened to no one, did more and more desperate deeds, drank yet harder, and had become the dread of the whole village.

In short, he was rolling swiftly to his destruction down a precipitous hill. All Lipka had their eyes upon him—eyes of suspicion and apprehension. As to the fire, indeed, they were divided in opinion; but they saw with their own eyes the deeds he undoubtedly did, and their animosity increased daily; besides, the smith was always inciting them against him. Even his former friends soon began to hold aloof from him; but to Antek, blinded by the lust of revenge, that was all one.

And over and above this, as if to spite all men, he continued his relations with Yagna. Was it love that attracted him? or what was it? God knows: but they met in Dominikova's barn: without her knowledge, indeed, but willingly abetted by Simon, who hoped that Antek would help him to get Nastka for his wife.

Those meetings were unwillingy consented to by Yagna. With the wales of her husband's castigation still fresh upon her, she had no mind for love-making; but she feared Antek, who had sent her word that, unless she came at every call of his, he would go to her hut, and in broad daylight and in public administer a chastisement yet more severe than Boryna's had been!

As the saying is: "For the authors of their fall, sinners have no love at all"; but she feared his threat, and was forced to go.

This state of things, however, did not last long. The

second day of Lent, Simon came in haste to the tavern and, taking Antek aside, told him that Yagna had just been reconciled to her goodman and returned to his cabin.

If a club had crashed down on his skull, it would not have stunned him more than this news. She had met him the very day before, and had said no word of this.

"So! she left me in the dark!" he thought, and hurried away to Boryna's as soon as evening had fallen.

He prowled for a long time about his father's premises, looking for her and waiting by the stile; but she was not to be seen. This irritated him so violently that he boldly pulled up a stake and entered the enclosure, ready to proceed to any extremity—even to go into the hut; in fact, he was in the passage, with his hand on the latch . . . when an unknown feeling of dread drove him from the door! His father's face had come before him with such sudden vividness that he started back in terror from that mental image.

What it was that had come over him, and why he had quailed now again, just as on that former night beside the pond, he was all his life unable to understand.

On the following days too, he got no sight of her, although he watched by the stile, and lurked about there for whole evenings together, like a wolf.

Sunday come round, and he waited for a long while in front of the church: but she did not appear.

The thought struck him that he might perhaps meet her at Vespers, and get speech with her somehow. So he went.

He was rather late. Evensong had already begun. The church was full, and so dark that the daylight, now dying, only lit the topmost vaults. A few tiny rushlights had been kindled here and there, to read by; in front of the high altar, brilliantly illuminated, the people were thronging close. He elbowed his way as far as the sanctuary railings, and looked furtively round for Yagna; but she was nowhere in sight. Instead, he caught many a look of curiosity directed towards himself.

They were chanting the "Bitter Lamentations," for it was

the first Sunday in Lent. The priest was sitting, surpliced and book in hand, beside the altar, and more than once cast a stern look in his direction.

The organ was pealing forth soul-stirring music, and the whole congregation lifted up their voices in unison. Now and then the chant was interrupted, the music stopped playing, and from high above in the organ-loft a broken voice was heard, reading out a meditation on the Passion of our Lord.

But Antek heard nothing now. Little by little, he had forgotten where he was and why he had come; the chants had sunk into his soul, and unstrung him strangely. A sense of numbness overpowered him, together with a feeling of deep quiet, as though he had escaped and flown somewhere very far away—into some region full of light. And whenever he came to himself and opened his eyes, he met the eyes of the priest, always fixed on him; and that look was so piercing that Antek turned away his heavy drowsy head, and began to fall once more into his torpor. Suddenly he woke up at the sound of a well-known chant:

"Behold! the Lord of heaven hangs crucified:
Weep for thy sins, O man! for them He died!"

As if issuing from one single colossal throat, the chant—an immense wave of sound—came bursting forth with such vehement lamentation, so clamorous a wail, that the very walls vibrated to that cry!

Long did they sing thus and the walls echoed with dolorous reverberations, and sighs, and earnest sobbing prayers.

Antek no longer felt drowsy, but a heavy resistless sense of sorrow surged over his soul with such potency that it was all he could do to restrain the tears which started to his eyes; and he was about to leave the church, when the organ again ceased playing, and the priest, standing in front of the altar, began to speak.

The people were pressing forward in so densely packed a

crowd that it was now impossible to get away, and Antek was pushed up against the railing. A great hush fell upon all; every word the priest said was distinctly audible. He spoke first of our Lord's Passion, and then passed on to inveigh against sin, waving his arms with threatening gestures, from time to time looking hard at Antek, who stood right in front of him, though somewhat lower, spellbound by the priest's burning glances, and unable to take his eyes off him.

In the audience there was presently a noise of weeping and sighing, the holy Name of Jesus was invoked, and even groans were heard. Meanwhile the priest spoke ever louder and with greater sternness; he seemed to them to have waxed somehow taller; lightnings shot from his eyes, and he lifted up his hands, and his words fell like stones hurled from them, and, like red-hot irons, they burnt into the hearts. He spoke of their wickedness and manifold transgressions; of the hardened sinners who lived amongst them; of their forgetfulness of God's commandments, their eternal quarrels and fights and drunken bouts. He exhorted them with great zeal, making them tremble in themselves, so that all hearts were melted with sorrow; tears fell like dew, and there was a low ripple of weeping, and sighs of contrition arose.—Then the priest suddenly bent forward towards Antek, and with a mighty voice cried out against unnatural sons, who burned down the homes of their own fathers; and against seducers and all such men of iniquity, whom (he said) neither the everlasting fires nor the judgments of men would fail to punish.

All the congregation were struck with awe and held their breath. Every eye was cast upon Antek like a fiery dart. He, white as a sheet, and scarcely able to breathe, stood stiffly upright, the words smiting him as if the church were falling about his ears. He looked round, as though to find help; but there was now an empty space round him, lined only by menacing or terrified faces. The folk shrank from him, as from one stricken with the plague.—And now the priest cried aloud, calling him to repentance, beseeching,

imploring, adjuring him. Finally, turning again to the people, he exhorted them with outstretched arms to beware of a man so infamous, to protect themselves against him, to refuse him fire, water, food—aye, and not to let him so much as darken their doors. "For such a one would taint you all; ye would all grow foul at his touch; and, should he not mend his ways, atone for his misdeeds and do penance, then ought ye to pluck him out as ye weed stinging nettles, and cast him forth to his perdition!"

At those words, Antek suddenly turned round; the people fell away from him right and left, and he passed out by the lane thus made, while the priest's voice followed, smiting him as with a scourge that drew blood at each stroke.

A wild cry of despair echoed at that moment through the church; but Antek did not hear it. He walked out as fast as he could, fearing lest he should fall dead with agony—fearing those eyes that glowed, fearing that awful voice.

He went out into the highway and on to the poplar road, leading to the woods. From time to time, he paused affrighted: he still could hear that voice, which rang in his ears like a knell.

It was a cold and windy night. The poplars were rocking noisily; sometimes a bough struck him across the face; and when the gale fell, there came a cold thin March rain that drizzled in his eyes. But Antek went on his way unheeding, bewildered, amazed, filled with unspeakable awe.

"Things are now at their worst!" he muttered at last, coming to a standstill. "Yes, he was right! he was right!"

"O Jesus! My Jesus!" he shrieked, seizing his head in his hands with a sudden clutch. At that instant he had seen as in a flash all the horror of his sins, and was torn with an unearthly sense of humiliation.

He sat for a long time brooding under a tree, gazing into the night and listening to the low, tremulous, eerie music of the waving trees.

A convulsion of rage and hatred seized him. "It is all through that man—that man!" he exclaimed, his former

resentment springing up anew, and all those cravings for revenge spreading over his mind again, dark as the clouds that overspread the sky.

"Never will I forgive him! no, never!" he bellowed, his recklessness returning. And he at once started up, to go back to the village.

The church was now locked; the cabin-windows shone bright. As he went by, he passed several knots of people, who, in spite of the rain, stood engaged in eager talk.

On passing the tavern, he looked in at the window, saw there was plenty of company inside, and went in boldly, as if there had been nothing amiss. But when he approached the largest group with greetings, only one or two shook hands with him; the others hastily withdrew and left the place.

In a minute, he was all but alone in the tavern. Besides the Jew behind the bar, there was only a *Dziad* sitting by the fire.

He had driven them all away! It was a bitter pill, but he swallowed it, and ordered some vodka; then, laying down the glass untouched, he rushed out.

He strayed along the banks of the pond, eyeing with a vacant stare the long fiery streaks which, from the lighted windows, swept over the wet snow and glistened on the water with which the ice was now covered.

Gentler thoughts came to him. His heart felt unspeakably heavy: he was so terribly alone, so much in want of human converse, of some fireside to sit by, that he went straight to Ploshka's cabin, the first along his way.

A large assembly was there; but, when he entered, they all started to their feet in dismay. Even Staho, who was there too, could not find a word to say to him.

He muttered: "Ye stare at me as if I were a murderer!" and went out to the next hut, which was Balcerek's.

Here they received him with the utmost frigidity, mumbling some inarticulate words in response to his greeting, and not even asking him to be seated.

He looked in at several huts in this way, and with the

same result. As a last resource, and to leave no drop of pain and humiliation untasted, he went to see Matthew. But the man was not in; and his mother at once, and from the very threshold, stormed at him and drove him out like a dog.

He answered not a word, nor did he indeed feel any resentment now; for the time, all bitterness had left him. He plodded on slowly through the darkness, stopping at times to look around him on the village, bright with many a lighted window, at which, and at the lowly huts that rose on every side, he gazed in bewilderment, as though he had never seen them before. In those hedgerows, those orchards, those lights, resided a strange spell, which somehow chained him to the spot. It was incomprehensible, but he experienced a resistless power that had seized hold of him and bound him to the land—which made him bow his neck to the yoke, and filled him with an inexplicable dread.

He eyed those lamplit windows, and terror possessed his soul. They were all watching him, he thought; they were peering at him, following him, to fetter and enslave him with adamantine chains. He was no longer able to flee, nor to move, nor to cry out. He leaned back against a tree; and there, crushed with anguish, he listened . . . and heard —from all the homesteads, the shadows around them, the fields, nay, even the heavens themselves—those same words of pitiless condemnation, now ratified by the whole population of Lipka!

"It is just! it is just!" he said, huskily, humbled to the dust, and from the inmost depths of his miserable heart, struck with mortal fear of that almighty Power—the Voice of the Many.

By degrees all the lights went out, and the village fell asleep. It drizzled still, and drops pattered from the drooping trees. Occasionally a dog would utter a short bark, in the midst of the stillness that reigned everywhere. Then Antek, returning to complete consciousness, suddenly started to his feet.

"Yes, he spoke justly; he said the truth as it was in

him. But I will not let the other go scot-free—not I! Blood of a dog! whatever happens, he shall pay!"

His words were a frenzied shriek, and he shook his fist at Lipka and at the whole world.

Settling his cap on his head, he made again for the tavern.

CHAPTER XIII

SPRING was drawing nigh. March had come, with its own most foul weather—quagmiry, chilly, foggy; with its daily falls of sleet, its daily thick, shaggy, dingy mists, creeping along over the fields, and quenching all light so thoroughly that the whole day, from grey dawn to dusky twilight, was equally dark. Or, if at rare intervals the sun peered, half drowned, out of those sombre abysses, it was but for the space of one Ave Maria; and ere one's soul could rejoice in the splendour, one's body in the warmth of it, down came the dusk once more upon the world, down swept the winds afresh, and the "fog and filthy air" resumed their reign.

Folk were sorely troubled at this, for they had lived in hope that, after a week or two, spring would get the upper hand and make amends for all they had suffered. And, meantime, the roofs let the rain in, the water came through walls and windows, and poured on every side. In despair they saw it creep in from the fields, fill all the ditches even to brimming over, make the roads gleam and glitter like waterways, come round through the hedgerows, and stand about the farm-yards in deep miry pools. And as the snow continued to melt and the rain to fall, the thawed ground soon softened to such a degree that in many farm-yards there were mud-pits without number at noontide, and folk had to lay boards outside the huts, or bridge the approaches with trusses of straw.

Nor were the nights less unbearable, with their downpours and their black darkness—so thick that one might fancy light had gone out for ever. Few lit fires in the evening: weary of the wretched weather, all went to bed at nightfall—and Lipka was in palpable obscurity. True, in a

few huts they assembled to spin: there the windows gleamed, and the low chant of the "Lamentations" quavered, together with other mournful hymns on the sufferings of Jesus. They were accompanied by the blasts, the pattering rain, and the trees lashing one against the other through the enclosures.

No wonder if Lipka was lost in this sea of slush: the huts were so lowly, they scarce rose out of the ground where they crouched, dank, dingy, wretched to look upon. And, as to the lands and gardens and roads and sky, there was so much water everywhere that no one could distinguish anything from anything else.

The weather was bleak, besides; it chilled the very bones, and few cared to meet it. The blasts blew, the rain pattered, the trees rocked in a solitude; for all the voices heard, Lipka might as well have been a place of the dead. Only the cattle lowed sometimes over their empty mangers; or cocks fell a-crowing; or ganders, parted from their brooding mates, would cry aloud and indignantly.

The days were longer; but this only made the time hang more heavily on people's hands. No one had any work to do, except the few who laboured at the saw-mill or carried timber for the miller from the forest. The others lounged about the cabins, sitting at their neighbours' till the day dragged on to its close. Some of the older men took to getting ploughs, or harrows, or other such implements, ready for spring; but the work went on slowly and lifelessly, all being equally exasperated by the foul weather. And troubled at heart, besides; for the lands sown in autumn were in a pitiful state; and—especially in the low-lying fields—parts of the crops were frozen. Some of the farmers, too, were getting to the end of their provender, and famine was looking in at the byres. Others had found that all their stock of potatoes was frost-nipped. Others, again, had their huts full of sick folk; and for many the days of starvation which often usher in the spring seemed at hand.

So in more than one cabin warm meals were served only

once a day; and people went to the miller in ever-increasing numbers to borrow a few bushels of flour that they were to pay for later in work. He was, indeed, a confounded extortioner; but no one had either ready money, or things to sell in town. Others went whining to Yankel, begging him to lend them a screw of salt, or a quart of groats, or a loaf of bread, putting their pride in their pockets; for, as the proverb runs: "When it comes to the worst, Goodman Belly is first."

So many of the folk were in want, and there was no work for them to do! The peasant-farmers themselves had none to give. The Squire was resolved not to let one man of Lipka earn a kopek in his forest, and remained unmoved even by the prayers of a large deputation. And thus, both amongst the *Komorniki* and the poorer peasant landowners, the misery became so great that many a one thanked God that he still had potatoes, and salt to season them with —though with bitter tears into the bargain!

Therefore there was now much heart-burning in the village, with quarrelling and conflicts as well. People were restless, uncertain of the morrow, and sorely agitated, everyone seeking to satisfy the greed which gnawed at his heart by snatching whatever he could from his neighbour.

Over and above all this, the village was afflicted with many sicknesses, as is often the case just before spring; for at that time noxious vapours rise up from the thawing ground. Smallpox swooped down first, like a hawk on a brood of goslings, slaying the little ones. Both the youngest children of the Voyt were taken, in spite of the doctors whom he called in. Then the grown-ups were assailed by many diseases, and to such an extent that in every other cabin someone lay moaning, in expectation of the grave and trusting to the mercy of God. Dominikova was overcharged with patients.—And, just then, the cows' time for calving came round, and many a woman was brought to bed: so that the distress and confusion in the village became very great.

People were accordingly looking forward to spring with

ever more and more impatience. All were sure that, as soon as the snows had melted, and the lands were thawed and dry, and the sun shone bright so that they could go out to plough, all their trouble and distress would be over at last.

But that year they remarked that the spring was slower to come than usual. The rain never ceased, the ground thawed very slowly; and besides—a bad sign, foreboding a long winter!—even now, the kine had not begun to shed their hair.

Therefore, whenever there came a single hour of dry weather and radiant sun, the villagers came swarming out of their huts and gazed up into the sky and wondered whether this change would last at all. The old folk basked in the bright beams to warm their tottering limbs, and all the little ones ran out along the roads in noisy crowds, like colts let into the meadows for the first time in spring.

How merry and jocund and full of glee they all were then!

The whole land lay in the genial warmth, and all the waters were bathed in light; the ditches seemed brimful of molten sun; the ice on the pond, washed by the rains, looked like a huge dish of blackened tinware; the trees sparkled with yet undried dew; the furrow-streaked fields spread out, quiet and dark of hue, but already inhaling the warmth, and swollen with the spring-tide and the sparkling murmurous waters. The snows, too, still unmelted here and there, shone with crude whiteness, like linen laid out to bleach: the azure sky revealed its depths, hitherto veiled in mists, and hidden under a web of gossamer, as it were; now the eyes could sound its infinite blue fields, or glance over to the dark horizon and the wavy outline of the woods.

And the world around was panting with joy; for such sweet spring odours were wafted all about them that a cry of happiness gushed from the hearts of men, and their souls aspired to soar upwards in the sunlight, like those birds

they saw coming from somewhere in the far-away east and floating in the crystal air. Every man came out of doors with delight, and took pleasure in talking, even with one who was no friend to him.

For at that moment all bickerings were done with, all quarrels appeased: everyone felt full of loving-kindness towards everyone. Cries of gladness echoed from hut to hut, and trilled through the balmy air.

Then did they throw the cabin-doors wide open, and remove the windows from their clamped fastenings to let in the air; the women took their spinning-gear outside, and even the babes were carried out in their cradles to get some sunlight. From the byres, again and again, there floated the anxious lowing of the kine; horses neighed, eager to quit their stables; cocks crowed in the hedges, and dogs, barking wildly, ran about like mad, and splashed with the children in the mud.

Their elders, staying within the enclosures, blinked in the dazzling sunbeams, and looked with delight at the country round, all bathed in splendour. Women chatted together over their orchard-fences, and their voices resounded afar. They told how someone had heard the song of a lark, how wagtails had been seen on the poplar road—and then another caught sight of a string of wild geese far up in the sky, and half the village ran out to look at them —and a third affirmed that storks had already alighted on the flats by the mill. This was doubted, for March had not yet begun its third week. And then a lad brought in the first spray of blossoms, and ran with it round to every hut, where they gloated over the pale clusters in deep admiration, as over some most sacred thing.

So that illusory spell of warmth had made them all believe that spring was at their gates, and that presently they would be ploughing their fields. Their dismay and mortification were therefore all the more intense, when they saw the sky suddenly clouded over, the sun quite hidden from sight, all the brightness faded, the land darkened once more,

and a thin rain beginning to fall! With the coming of night, the rain was followed by snow; and very shortly the village and its environs were whitened over anew.

Things were again in their former state; and the subsequent days of slush and mire and wet made them feel almost as though the past hours of sunshine had been only a bright dream.

Whilst folks were spending their days in such hopes and desires, and joys so soon doomed to disappointment, it was quite natural that Antek's conduct, the domestic troubles of Boryna, and all the rest—even to the deaths which took place—should fall into forgetfulness, like a stone flung into a deep lake: every man had enough worries of his own, and scarcely knew how to bear them.

But the days rolled on, neither stopping nor hurrying, without end, without commencement, as the waves of a great sea: hardly had they opened their eyes and looked round, and taken note of a few things (how few!), when twilight was there again, and night, and then another day dawned with its own fresh troubles. And all was repeated once more, that the will of God might be accomplished upon earth!

One day—it was about Mid-Lent—the weather was at its very worst. True, only a drizzle of rain fell; but the worn-out folk were in a state of extreme and bitter restlessness, moving to and fro as men possessed, looking forth sullenly at their world covered with clouds so louring that, as they swept bellying past, they brushed the tree-tops. All was sad, cold, darksome, dripping with wet, and wringing every heart with uncontrollable aversion. Nobody quarrelled with anyone that day; no one cared for anything at all: everyone longed for some quiet nook where he could lie down and think of nothing.

The whole day had been gloomy, as the eyes of a sick man who wakes, glances round, and falls again to the darkness of lethargy. Scarcely had the noonday Angelus rung, when a sullen rain-bearing wind rose and smote upon the dark-hued shadowy cabins.

No one was out of doors. The gusts, with their quick flaws of rain, swept shrieking over the mire, churning it up, and pelting the shaken trees and the smirched walls as with handfuls of corn flung down: while the pond was wrestling with the broken ice-pack, pounding and tossing on its shores, with a growling gurgling rumble.

But on the evening of that same day, a rumour flew through the village that the Squire was hewing down the peasants' part of the forest!

At first, no one would believe it. The thing had not been attempted till then: how could it be done now, when March was half over, the ground a quagmire, and the trees swelling with sap?

True, men were at work in the forest; but, as all knew, it was quite another sort of work.

And then the Squire, no matter what he was called, had never been called a fool by anyone.

Could the man, then, be such a fool as to try floating the timber down . . . in March?

All the same, the village was upset with this report, and doors banged, and mud was waded through, and the news travelled from cabin to cabin. They stood talking of it upon the highway, they went to think it over in the tavern . . . and also to question the Jew on the matter. But the crafty "yellow one" swore he knew nothing whatever about it. A great outcry was made, evil words were spoken, the women lamented, and public indignation, fury, excitement and fear continued to increase.

Finally, old Klemba decided to get the news verified, and sent two of his sons on horseback to the forest as scouts, in spite of the bad weather.

It was long ere they returned. From every hut, someone went out to watch the forest in the direction they had taken. But twilight had deepened into darkness, and they were not yet back. The village was full of a stillness, ominous of passions all the more dangerous because thus reined in. Every soul was now smouldering with the fiercest animosity; for, though no one quite believed this disastrous

rumour to be true, they all expected it might be confirmed; and many were the curses and slammings of doors, as one after another went to see if the boys were returning.

Kozlova bustled about everywhere, and upheld the truth of the rumour to anyone that would listen to her talk, swearing by all the saints that she had with her own eyes seen a good many acres of peasants' forest hewn down already. She appealed to Yagustynka, who had lately been very much hand-in-glove with her, and of course confirmed her words, as rejoicing in every broil and disturbance, the hag! And she then, having picked up some more items of gossip at various places, went to carry them to Boryna's.

The lamp was just lit in the work-room; Yuzka was peeling potatoes, Vitek assisting her; Yagna was busied in household duties. Somewhat later, Boryna came in, and old Yagustynka told him of all she had heard, with very many additions. He did not say one word to her in reply, but, turning to Yagna, "Take a spade," he said, "and go to help Pete; the water must be let out of the orchard, or it will be pouring into the potato-pits.—Off with you instantly, I say!" he cried.

Yagna mumbled some objections; but he gave her such a look that she had to run out directly; he following her steps to overlook the work, and soon audible, storming about the byre, the stable and the potato-pits.

"Is the old man always so cantankerous?" Yagustynka queried, raking up the fire.

"He is," Yuzka said, as she listened to his voice in fear.

It was the truth. Since he had taken back his wife—which he had done so readily that folk wondered—he had altered beyond recognition. Always had he been a hard man, and a stubborn; but now he had turned into stone. Yes, he had taken her back, and without one word of reproach; only now she was for him simply a serving-wench —nothing more. She had tried endearments upon him: they had failed. Nor did her charms avail her any more than peevishness, or those fits of petulance and tantrums, the weapons of women against men. To them he paid no

heed whatever, and treated her as a stranger, and no wedded wife: so much so, that he no longer troubled what she did, though perfectly aware that she still met Antek.

He did not even watch over her. A few days after the "reconciliation," he had driven to town, returning only the next day; and folk whispered that he had been at the notary's and drawn some document or other; some even surmising that he had revoked his deed of gift in Yagna's favour. As a matter of fact, none but Hanka knew the truth, and she kept it dark. She was now in such favour with her father-in-law that he confided everything he did to her. She saw him nearly every day, and the children almost made their home there, often sleeping with their grandfather, who loved them dearly.

Perhaps as a consequence of this change, Boryna's health seemed to be quite restored. He stooped no longer, as he had done of late; his glance was again as proud as of old. But now he had become so choleric besides, that he would fly out on the slightest provocation. His hand was heavy on everybody, and when he laid it on anyone, that one must bend even to the ground; and all things be done according to his will.

Not that he treated people unjustly; but gentleness was not in his line any more. He had taken the reins into his own hands, and never let them go for an instant. He kept a watchful eye on the stores, and yet more on his pocket, doling out everything in person, and looking carefully to prevent all waste. Harsh to everyone at home, he was especially so to Yagna, never expressed himself as being pleased with her, and drove her to work as they drive a lazy horse. No day passed without its squabble; often, very often, his leather girdle came into play, or even something still harder; for Yagna was possessed by a devil of contradiction, and did her best to spite him.

Obey him she did, for she could not help it; and how could she resist? "Who eats her husband's bread must do her husband's will." But for one sharp word of his she gave him ten. The cabin was really turned into a hell; it

seemed as if they both enjoyed making it so, each striving to the uttermost, and eager to put the other down, both equally headstrong and unyielding.

Dominikova quite unavailingly attempted to come between them and effect a true reconciliation. It was out of the question: the feelings of wrongs, of cruel treatment, and of mutual hatred rankled too deep within their hearts.

All Boryna's fondness had gone where last year's springtide was. He had only the lively remembrance of her betrayal, undying humiliation, and absolutely implacable malice. Yagna's mind, too, was very greatly changed. She felt unspeakably miserable; but she had not yet admitted that she was to blame! Her punishment was harder for her than it would have been for others, because she was more affectionate of heart, had been more delicately brought up, and was naturally daintier than most women.

And she suffered, Lord! how terribly!

True, she employed every means to vex her husband, never gave way unless under compulsion, and defended herself tooth and nail; but daily the yoke grew heavier and heavier; it galled her to the quick, and there was no escape. Many a time she had wanted to return to her mother, but the latter was so strongly opposed to such a step that she threatened to send her back to her husband by force, at the end of a rope!

What, then, was she to do? She could not take up the attitude so many women in her position take, willingly supporting hell at home for pleasure with sweethearts, full and free: a fight every day, and a reconciliation when night comes round.

No, that would have been too loathsome to her. Yet her present state was growing steadily more and more insupportable, and her craving for something new—she knew not what—increased as steadily.

She gave Boryna spite for spite. Nevertheless, she lived in continual terror, oppressed by such a sense of injustice and such bitter sorrow that she often wept for whole nights, watering her pillow with tears; while by day those per-

petual brawls and conflicts were not infrequently so hateful to her that she only dreamed of fleeing away somewhither —far, far away!

Somewhither! Aye, but whither?

Yes, the world stretched wide around her; but that world —it was such an appalling, unknown, unfathomable vagueness that the mere thought of it frightened her to death.

It was this which still drew her towards Antek, though what she felt was not so much love as terror and despair. In that fearful night, when she had fled to her mother's, something within her had burst and perished, so to speak; and now she could no longer fly to him with her whole heart, as she had done before; no more could she run to him at every call with joyfully beating heart. She went only from a sense of necessity—because the cabin was dull and wearisome, because she hated her husband—because she fancied that her former immense love might perhaps come to life again. In her inmost heart she felt bitter against him. Her present wretched position, the hard life she was leading now, her blighted reputation—all were due to him; and, moreover, she realized the fact that he was not that which she had adored, and she knew the fierce pangs of disenchantment and disillusion. He had formerly seemed to her quite another being—one whose fondness lifted her up to heaven, whose kindness overmastered her—the sweetest, dearest being in all the world. And now she saw he was just the same as any other peasant. Worse, indeed; for she was more afraid of him than even of her husband. He frightened her by his dark moods, by his fits of desolation, and, above all, by his reckless violence. He made her tremble, for he was, in her eyes, wild and fierce as a forest outlaw. Why, the priest himself had rebuked him publicly in church; the whole village had shrank away from him, and now pointed him out as the worst amongst them; and there proceeded out of him such an exhalation of mortal sin that the mere sound of his voice often made her faint with dread: it seemed to her as though Satan dwelt in him, and as if around him there hovered all the host of hell. At

those moments she had such impressions as when his Reverence told the people about the awful torments of the lost!

Not for one instant did it come home to her that she had part in his guilt: not in the least! When she thought of him, it was but to mourn that he had so greatly changed, and her feelings on that score became so strong that she cared for him ever less and less. At times, when embraced by him, she would stiffen suddenly, as if struck dead by a thunderbolt. She let him kiss her—for how could she resist such a dragon of a man? Moreover, she felt young, full-blooded, of lively temperament . . . and his kisses were so violent, they well-nigh choked her. So, in spite of all, she would still give him her love with the mighty elemental craving of the earth that thirsts eternally for warm rain and sunshine; but yet her inner self was no more at his feet, driven by that former uncontrollable impulse; she was no more given up to that blind rapture which once upon a time had made her feel nigh death; she was nevermore again to be so frantically lovesick. At such times, her thoughts would fly to the hut, to her work, to some new invention to spite her husband; and at times she even thought: "When will this man leave me and go away?"

These thoughts about him were in her mind as she was working to keep the water out of the potato-pits. Her work was only for the eye, and as in duty bound. Pete toiled with a will, battling noisily with the mud and the frozen earth; she worked that Boryna might see her. No sooner had he left the place than she put her apron over her head, and went cautiously round to the stile, close to Ploshka's barn.

There stood Antek.

"I have been waiting an hour for you," he said reproachfully.

"No need to wait at all, if they want you anywhere," she rapped out, in no pleasant humour.

He caught her in a powerful grasp, and gave her a kiss. She turned from him in disgust.

"Ye reek of vodka like a barrel of the same."

"Are ye so dainty that my lips offend you now?"

"'Twas but the vodka that I had in mind," she answered in a gentler tone.

"I was here yestereve. Wherefore did ye not come?"

"It was cold; and besides, I am over head and ears in work."

"And you have to fondle the old man," Antek growled, "and tuck him up in bed!"

"Why not?" she replied testily. "He is my husband."

"Yagna, do not provoke me!"

"If my words vex you, why come at all? Think not that I shall weep for you!"

"Ah, that means you do not care to come any more."

"Not if I am to be treated as a dog, and always chid."

"Yagna, I have so many troubles of my own that 'tis no great wonder if a harsh word drops from me now and then; but I mean no offence," he said humbly, gathering her in his arms. She, however, remained frigid and sulky, and only unwillingly returned his kisses. At every word she spoke, she looked around, seeking to go home.

This he was not slow to note, and a nettle thrust into his bosom would not have stung him more. He whispered, in a tone of timid reproach:

"You were not always in such a hurry!"

"I am afraid. All the people are at home: perhaps they will come out to look for me."

"Aye, aye! But there was a time when you did not fear to stay out all night. Oh, how you have changed!"

"Nonsense! What should have changed me?"

They were silent, each embracing the other, and sometimes with a closer hug of sudden fondness which the memory of past times called up; and they sought each other's lips with strong desire of love. But it would not do. Their souls were drifting farther and farther apart; each harboured bitter grudges against the other, and their wounds rankled so that their arms instinctively fell to their sides. They stood close, but like pillars of ice together; while words of tenderness and passion rose to their lips (but went no

farther and died unuttered), their hearts were throbbing with sharp pain.

"Yagna," he said, very low, "do you love me?"

"Why, I have already told you I cannot always come when you call," she answered evasively; and yet she pressed closer to him—feeling sorry, regretful, almost ready to ask his pardon with tears for not being able to love him any more. He read her meaning; and her words chilled him to the marrow, and he quivered with the pang they gave him; resentment burst out in his heart, and with it came reproaches and invectives which he could not choke down, and a torrent of angry words.

"You are a living lie! They all have fallen away from me, and so have you!—Love me? Aye, even as a dog that bares its teeth to bite loves me! Yes, I have seen through you clearly, and this I know: if folk were minded to slay me, you'd be the first to lend a rope; if to stone me, you'd throw the first stone!"

"Antek!" she cried, aghast.

"Be still, and hear me out!" he said sternly. "I have spoken the truth. . . . And since it has come to this—well, then, there now is naught in the world that I care for!"

"I must be off; they are calling me," she stammered, alarmed and trying to make her escape. But he seized her arm, so that she could not move, and went on in harsh menacing tones:

"This, moreover, do I tell you . . . for you have not then sense to see it for yourself: If I have fallen so low as this, it is through you—mark well—through you! . . . Because of you, the priest has rebuked me and driven me from the church! Because of you, the whole village shrinks from me as from one smitten with the plague. . . . I have borne all . . . all. . . . Nor did I take revenge when he —that father of mine—gave into your hands so much of the land that's my own! . . . And now—now—*you* loathe me! Aye, turn and writhe and twist it as you will, you lie! —You are like the rest of them, you look on me as they do, and fear me as if I were a robber or a slayer of men!

"What you want is another man: nay, ye would have them all at your heels . . . like dogs in the springtime—you!" he screamed, beside himself with rage. And then he overwhelmed her with the agonies and the venomous thoughts he had fed on for so long, making her responsible for all, and cursing her for his sufferings, until at last his anger choked his voice and maddened him so, that he rushed upon her with uplifted fists. But, stopping short just in time, he flung her back against the wall—and strode off!

"O Lord!—Antek!" she cried, realizing all at once what he meant; and, darting after him, she put her arms round his neck in despair. But he cast her off as one shakes off a leech, and hastened away without a word; while she fell to the ground, crushed and broken as if the whole universe had fallen upon her.

After some time, however, she came in some sort to her senses; but the feeling of deep injustice she had suffered and of the wrong undergone was so keen in her that her heart was broken with grief. She felt herself suffocating, and wanted to cry out to the whole world that she was blameless and had done no evil!

She called aloud after him, although his steps were no longer to be heard; she lifted up her voice, but in vain.

Her deep distress, her heart-felt sorrow, and the dull, crushing, terribly cruel thought that he might possibly never return to her, together with her dead fondness that had come to life again, all descended upon her now, with a tremendous weight of unappeasable torment; and she wept loudly as she walked home, caring not who might hear her.

In the porch she met Klemba's son, who only just peeped into the cabin, shouting: "They are cutting down our forest!" and hurried on to the next hut.

The news spread like wildfire through Lipka, and gripped all hearts, filling them with fierce anger. Men ran through the village with the news, so fast that doors were opening and slamming every instant.

Truly, it was a matter of life and death to the villagers,

and of such evil import that they were all at once struck dumb—or, rather, thunderstruck. They walked in fear, on tiptoe, spoke in whispers, looking with apprehension at one another, and listening likewise. No one cried out yet, nor complained aloud, nor broke out into curses. The thing was overwhelming, they all knew, and of the greatest moment—one in which women's babbling could do nothing. What was required was wise determination and resolve on the part of the whole community.

It was late; but no one cared to go to bed now. Some had left their supper unfinished, the household work unaccomplished. The roads were full of people, as were also the cabin surroundings. Men walked about on the banks of the pond, and their subdued whispers and mutterings were audible in the twilight as the buzzing of angry bees.

And now the weather was better; the rain had stopped, the sky had cleared up a little; flocks of clouds were moving across the sky, and on the earth a chilly wind blew, freezing the ground, and whitening with hoar-frost the black skeletons of the trees. The voices, too, though not loud, were now more distinctly heard.

It was at once known in the village that a number of peasant-landowners had assembled and gone in a body to see the Voyt.

There was Vinciorek, with Gregory, called the Lame One; they saw Michael Caban, passing along with Franek Bylitsa, cousin to Hanka's father; and Soho too, and also Valek the Wry-mouthed; likewise Joseph Vahnik, Casimir Sikora —even time-honoured Ploshka. Only Boryna was seen by none; though they said he was there, too.

The Voyt was not in; he had that very afternoon driven over to head-quarters on official business; so they all assembled at Klemba's, followed by multitudes, women and children among them. But they made the door fast and let no one in. Voytek, the son of Klemba, had orders to watch the road and tavern, lest a gendarme should by chance show his face in the village. . . .

Round the cabin, filling the farm-yard, and even the road

beyond it, folk came in throngs together, all wondering what decision those elders of theirs would come to. They were taking counsel, and at great length—but with most secret deliberation. Only their hoary heads were visible through the windows, forming a semicircle around the glowing hearth; Klemba stood on one side, holding forth about . . . no one knew what: stooping now and then, and smiting at times on the table.

Those outside grew every minute more impatient; and at length Kobus and Kozlova, and more than one farm-labourer, began to murmur and talk openly against the men in counsel, saying that they would decide nothing of any good for the people; that they were men who cared only for themselves, and would readily come to terms with the manor, letting everybody else be ruined!

Kobus, along with the *Komorniki* and the poorer people, became so excited that he advised them outright to pay no attention to what the elders would decide, but think of themselves and take some energetic step before their rights had been sold.

Matthew then appeared, and proposed that they should go round to the tavern, where they might advise together in freedom—not like dogs barking outside other people's windows.

The idea pleased them, and all went together to the tavern.

The Jew had put out the lights, but they made him open the place again. He eyed in terror the crowd that poured in, though they were quiet enough, occupying every bench, table and corner of the big room, talking in groups, and waiting for someone to speak first to the meeting.

Plenty were willing; but they all held back, with looks of hesitation. And then Antek sprang forward in their midst, and furiously denounced the manor.

His words impressed them certainly, but they looked askance at the man, and eyed him with distrustful side-glances; some even turned their backs. The memory of the priest's words in church, and of Antek's wicked life, was too fresh in their minds.—But he cared nothing for that: he

was possessed by a spirit of recklessness and a savage lust of fighting; and he wound up by crying at the top of his voice:

"Boys, do not give in, do not be cravens, do not surrender your rights! To-day it is the forest they are wresting from you: fail to defend it, and to-morrow they will grab at your lands, at your homesteads, at all you have! Who will prevent them? Who will cry: 'Hands off?'"

His words struck home. A low growl went through the room; the crowd surged violently to and fro, with wild eyes flashing fire. A hundred fists were lifted up, and a hundred throats thundered forth: "We will! We will!" till the tavern-walls shook to the din.

It was this that the leaders were waiting for. At once Matthew, Kobus and Kozlova rushed forward, shrieking, cursing, and ruffling up the spirits of the men so, that the place was presently resounding with a confused noise of war-cries, imprecations, fists smiting the tables, and the fierce boisterous uproar of an angry mob.

Everyone shouted his opinion, everyone had his own plan that all must follow.

The tumult increased, and threatened to degenerate into brawling; for the men were growing quarrelsome, and wreaked their resentment for the wrong done them on those nearest at hand. Nor could they agree on anything to be done; for no one there had authority enough to put himself at their head and avenge them.

Little by little, they broke up into groups, with the loudest talker amongst them laying down his opinion.

"Why, they have hewn down half the forest—oak-trees of such a size that five men could not clasp them!"

"All this the son of Klemba has seen!"

"And they are going to cut down the rest, without asking your leave!" Koslova shrieked, pressing forward to the bar.

"The manor-folk have always oppressed us."

"Why not? Let them drive you, if you are silly enough sheep to allow them."

"We must not, we must not!—Let's all go out together, drive off the woodmen, and take back our forest!"

"And slay the oppressor!"

"Yea, let him be slain!"

Fists rose into the air with defiant gestures, a deafening shout was raised, and the whole multitude breathed hate and revenge. When the noise had subsided, Matthew, standing at the bar, cried to his friends:

"We, village folk, are pressed together as fish caught in a net: the manor-lands, stretching out on all sides, squeeze the life out of us.—Would ye send your cows to grass? Ye cannot for the manor-lands.—Would ye give your horses to eat? No, the manor-lands are there!—Ye cannot throw a stone but it falls on the manor-lands . . . and ye are taken to the court—sentenced—fined—imprisoned!"

"True! true it is!" a chorus of voices assented. "If there is anywhere a good meadow, giving an aftermath, it belongs to the manor; the very best fields are the manor's; and all the woods are theirs also."

"And we—the people—have barren sands to till, dried dung to burn in our stoves . . . and are waiters on Providence!"

"Take their woods, take their lands away from them! We will not give up what is ours!"

Thus they cried out for a long time, rolling to and fro in a waving mass, cursing and threatening furiously. All this was tiring to the throat and heated them, so several went to refresh themselves at the bar; and others, remembering that they had gone without supper, called to the Jew for bread and a herring.

Now when they had eaten and drunk, their excitement lessened greatly, and they began to withdraw, without having decided on any course of action.

Matthew, along with Kobus and Antek (who had stood apart all the time, lost in certain very dark thoughts of his own), then went over to Klemba's and, finding the man at home, arranged for something to be done on the morrow in concert with him: after which they retired.

It was dead of night, the lights were all out, and the village silent, with nothing to break the stillness but the rustling of the trees—of the frost-bedight trees, swaying, tossing and reeling, and striking each other, like foes in a battle. The cold was pretty severe, the hedges were clad in a pattern of lace; but far above, to the north, no stars were seen, and the sky was dark and sombre. So the night crept on, long, wearisome, filling everyone with misgivings and disquiet, with terrible dreams and nightmares, and fevered shadowy visions.

But as soon as ever it began to dawn, and men to raise their heavy slumberous heads, and open their dim eyes, Antek ran round to the belfry and tolled the alarm-bell.

Ambrose and the organist would have prevented him, but could not; he loaded them with curses, was near beating them, and went on ringing and swinging.

The bell tolled slowly, dolefully, dismally; terror fell on everyone; people on every side rushed out in dismay, half clad, and wondering what had befallen, stood outside their huts as if petrified. The day was breaking; the solemn and sonorous notes still continued to be heard, while the frightened birds winged their way to the forest, and the people, full of evil forebodings, crossed themselves and set their faces hard; for Matthew, Kobus and his mates were scouring the village, beating on the fences with their staves and crying:

"To the wood! To the wood! Come, all of you! The meeting is in front of the tavern.—To the wood!"

They dressed in the utmost haste, some buttoning themselves and saying their morning prayers on their way; and all were soon at the trysting-place, where stood Klemba and some other peasant-landowners.

The road, and the hedgerows, and all the yards and premises in the neighbourhood, were presently swarming with people. Children made a great noise, and women screamed in the orchards, and the confusion and tumult and uproar were such as a fire in the village might cause.

"To the wood!—Let every man set out with any weapon he has—scythe or flail or bar of wood or ax: 'tis all one!"

And the cry, "To the wood!" echoed all through the place.

By this time it was broad day—fair, bright and frosty, with a web of gossamer woven over the trees, and the frozen puddles in the roads crackling underfoot and breaking with a thin sound as of splintered glass. The bracing air smelt keen and sharp in the nostrils, and carried afar the noise of the tumult and shouting.

These, however, died away slowly, for everyone was prepared to act; a sense of grim, stubborn, relentless strength and assurance had hardened every mind with its harsh commanding power.

The crowd, increasing, had now filled all the open space between the tavern and the high road, and stood in serried ranks, shoulder to shoulder.

Each greeted his friends in silence; everyone stood where he could find place, looking about him patiently, or at the elders, who now arrived with Boryna.

This was the first man among them all; he was their only leader: without him, not one farmer would have moved an inch.

They stood there, still, attentive, like a forest of pine-trees, closely crowded, that listens to hear the voices within its own depths. Now and again a word was uttered, or a fist would shoot upwards; then their eyes would gleam, a wave of restlessness sweep over them, a face or two flush crimson; and then they once more stood motionless.

The blacksmith came in hot haste, trying to hold the people back, and deter them from their intent by the fear of results—ruin and chains for the whole village; and the miller spoke to the same effect. No one listened to them. Both were well known to be in the pay of the manor; opposition was their business.

Roch, too, came and besought them with unavailing tears.

And, at last, the priest himself appeared, and began to speak to them. But even to him they paid no heed. They

stood unmoved; no one kissed his hand, no one even doffed his cap to him. Someone went so far as to cry aloud:

"Preaching is his livelihood!"

And another added, sneering:

"Our wrongs are not to be redressed with a sermon!"

So ominously louring were their faces that the priest burst into tears as he looked at them; yet he did not give up, but conjured them, by all they held most sacred, to return to their homes. It was useless; he was forced to be silent and go; for Boryna had come upon the scene, and they had eyes only for him.

Matthias was pale, stern and cold outwardly; but his eyes had the glint of a wolf's. He walked erect, sombre but decided, nodding to his acquaintances, and looking round upon the people. They made way for him, and he stepped on to the pile of logs in front of the tavern. But, before he spoke, voices in the crowd were raised:

"Lead us on, Matthias! lead us on!"

"On! on to the forest!"

When these cries had ceased, he bowed and, stretching forth his arms, spoke with a mighty voice:

"Ye Christian people, Poles, lovers of justice, whether husbandmen or *Komorniki!*—We have all been injured, and in such fashion as we can neither support nor forgive! The manor-folk are cutting down our forest . . . yes, those same manor-folk who will give no work to any man amongst us . . . those manor-folk who do all they can to harry us and drive us to ruin! Who can remember all the injuries and grievances and ill treatment our folk have suffered from them? We have appealed to justice: to what purpose? We have brought complaints: how have they been dealt with? —Well, the measure is filled: they are hewing down our forest. Men, shall we permit that too?"

"Never, never! Let us drive them off, let us slay them!" they answered him. Their faces were livid, but gleamed darkly, as a thunder-cloud with lightning-flashes: a hundred fists were shaken in the air, and a hundred indignant throats were clamorous.

"We have," Boryna went on to say, "we have our rights, and no one respects them: the forest is ours, and they cut it down! What, then, are we to do, we who are bereft of all help? For none in the world will do us justice. None!—Dear people, Christians, Poles, I tell you that there is now naught to be done save this one thing: defend by ourselves that which is our own property; go in a body, and forbid them to hew our forest down.—All! One and all! let us go, we, the inhabitants of Lipka—all save the cripples!—And, good friends, fear ye nothing: we have for us our rights, our will to assert them, and the justice of our cause. And, moreover, they cannot send a whole village to prison.—So come with me, men; be strong and courageous; come with me—to the forest!" he shouted in a voice of thunder.

"To the forest!" they all roared in reply. The crowd broke up, and every man ran home shouting. There was an interval of confused preparation, while they made ready: horses neighed, children screamed, men swore, women bewailed themselves; but in a very short time, all were on their way to the poplar road, where Boryna, in his sledge, was waiting, together with Ploshka, Klemba and the other foremost men in Lipka.

All fell into line as they came—peasant-owners, labourers, and even a few women and youngsters: some in sledges, some on horseback, some in carts; but the rest (nearly all the village) trudged on foot, forming a dense mass, like a long field of waving rustling corn, with the women's red garments for poppies, and, for the awns, bristling with good stout stakes and rusty pitchforks, with here and there a scythe, flashing brightly. The folk went out as if to reap —but not now with gay laughter and merry jokes. They stood silent, grim, relentless, ready for any encounter. And presently Boryna got into his sledge, eyed the people once more, and made the sign of the cross:

"In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!"

"Amen, amen!" they repeated.—At that moment, they heard a tinkling bell, telling them that the priest had just

begun mass. They crossed themselves, took off their caps, smote their breasts, some of them uttering a pious sigh, as they marched on in regular formation, strong silent men—almost all Lipka. But the blacksmith had slunk away somewhere amongst the hedges, and, creeping back to his hut, leaped on to his horse to take a straight cut to the manor. As for Antek, who had, ever since his father appeared, withdrawn into the tavern, he procured a gun from Yankel, and as soon as the march began, hid it beneath his sheepskin, and made direct for the woods through the fields, without so much as casting a glance at the men of Lipka.

These were following Boryna as fast as they could: he drove foremost of all.

After him came the Ploshka families, who dwelt in three separate cabins, and Staho was their leader: a weakly-looking crew, but loud of tongue, and noisy, and self-assured.

Then all the Soha kinsmen, led on by Simon the Soltys.

The Vahnik tribe marched next—short thin fellows all of them, but fierce as hornets.

In the fourth line walked the Golombs, with Matthew at their head: few in number, but such stalwart men and plucky fighters, they were as good as half a village.

The Sikora family came next: thickset as tree-stumps, and sturdy men, but great grumblers.

Klemba's kin now advanced, and a host of striplings with them: tall young men, always fond of squabbles.—Over them was Gregory, brother to the Voyt.

And many another, too, brought up the rear, whose names were too many to mention.

Under their ponderous tread, the earth shook. The troop went forward, with dark and ominous faces; like a hail-cloud, bearing thunderbolts in its womb, showing a flash now and then, and, when it bursts, destroying all beneath it.

So they passed out; and then, how great was the lamentation of those left behind them at home!

. . . . . .

The forest was standing, as yet torpid after the cold of the night, full of a drowsy stupor, and swathed in a mist of clotted opaqueness.

The woodland lay quiet, immersed in frost. The dawn reddened the tree-tops faintly, and fell here and there in streaks over the pallid snows below.

But, in Vilche Doly, there were heard, again and yet again, the thundering sound of falling trees, the clipping strokes of the axes, the harsh rough throbbing of the saws.

They were felling the forest!

Over forty men, hard at work, like a flock of woodpeckers, were assailing the trees, hacking at them with persistent fury. These fell, one after another, and the open space grew wider, as the fallen giants lay humbled to the ground, in longer and longer rows. Only in some places did a slender stripling, spared for seedlings, rise up in the midst of this desolation, as a tall thistle lifts its head over the lonely plain. But it seemed to stoop and mourn pitifully for its slain brothers.—The brushwood, too, that had been left untouched, and a few stunted trees which the ax had not deigned to sacrifice, also looked as though weeping over the dead. All round, upon the sheets of trampled snow, as if laid out to be wrapped in their shrouds, stiff and stark lay the murdered trees, and the heaps which had been their limbs, and the lopped crowns of the mighty trunks stripped of their boughs, like mangled mutilated corpses: while streams of yellow saw-dust—the blood of the slaughtered forest, as it were—were sinking into the snow.

In a circle about the cleared space, like men standing around an open grave, towered the thick unbroken forest, multitudinous and lofty, as friends and kinsmen might stand around, drooping, sorrowful, with muffled sighs, listening to the thudding falls, and gazing in dull bewilderment at this harvest reaped by inexorable Fate!

With never a pause, the wood-cutters went onward. Slowly, in one long line, they worked their way into the wood, which barred the way with its seemingly indestructible wall of close-set trunks. Its immensity swallowed them

up; they were lost in the shade of its branches; but their axes glittered through the gloom, and they hacked away tirelessly, and the stridulous uninterrupted rasping of the saws went on. Every now and then a tree would totter, and suddenly—like a bird caught in a snare—fall apart from its fellows and, tossing its arm wildly, crash down to the earth with a death-cry. And so another would fall, and a score, and scores upon scores!

There fell enormous pine-trees, green with the moss of age; and firs, arrayed in their dark verdure, and spruces with their many outspread arms; oak-trees, too, fell, with dry russet leaves still upon them, and overgrown with gray lichens as with beards—ancients of the forest that the thunderbolt would not blast, and the lapses of centuries had failed to crumble, now succumbed to the ax! And of other and meaner trees, who can say which and how many were laid low?

Groaning, the forest was slowly giving up its life as the trees fell: though these were like brave men in a battle, who, packed close and propped up one by another, fall little by little, giving way only to resistless might, and without a cry topple over into the jaws of death by whole ranks at a time.

Dull moans rose up; the earth vibrated continuously under the impact of felled trees; the axes went on smiting, the saws sawed without ceasing, while the whistling of the boughs, rushing athwart the air, pierced the ears like dying gasps.

So the work continued, hour after hour, with fresh booty won from the wood; the glade was all strewn with trunks, and the ax and saw were successful.

A few magpies perched and screamed upon the young trees spared for seedlings; a flock of crows would sometimes fly with harsh croaks over the field of death. Or else a roebuck would peer out from some thicket and, looking forth, gaze with bright eyes at the plumes of smoke wafted upwards from the fires in the clearing and at the down-

crashing trees; but when it saw men there, it fled with a bleating cry.

The men hewed and sawed, like wolves that have cornered a flock of sheep, which—huddled close, stupefied with fear, and bleating pitifully—await the moment when the throat of the last of them shall be torn out.

It was only after their breakfast, when the sun had risen so high that the hoar-frost began to melt, and a few shafts of golden light penetrated the woodlands—only then did a far-off hubbub come to their ears.

"There are people coming this way, and in numbers," someone said, putting his ear to a trunk.

The sound came nearer and nearer. Soon they could make out shouts and the dull trampling of many feet. About the space of an Ave Maria later, a sledge appeared on the way that led from the village. It entered the clearing at once. Boryna was standing up in it; and in his rear —on horseback, on foot, and in wagons—a great crowd of men, women and youngsters came dashing forward with a cry, to attack the wood-cutters.

Leaping down, Boryna ran forward at their head; all the others pressed close behind him, armed with their various weapons—brandishing pitchforks, flashing scythes, wielding flails with brawny arms. Some had only a branch to fight with, and the women less still—only their nails and their invectives!—And down they all swooped upon the affrighted wood-cutters.

"Away from the forest! 'Tis ours: ye shall not fell it!" they shouted all at the same time, and no man could make out what they wanted. But Boryna came up to the men, and called out in a voice like a trumpet:

"Men of Modlitsa, of Rzepki, and whencesoever ye come from: listen!"

There was a pause, and then he cried out:

"Take your belongings and tools, and go hence, and God be with you!—We forbid you to cut down our forest; and he that shall not obey will find us all ready to make him!"

No one opposed: the sight of that furious crowd, grim-visaged, with flails and pitchforks and scythes, overawed them. They cried to one another to give over, thrust their axes into their girdles, and pressed together—an angry muttering throng. The men of Rzepki especially, being of gentle blood, and having been besides for centuries at feud with their neighbours of Lipka, could not refrain from cursing aloud, shaking their axes, with promises of vengeance. But, however unwillingly, they yielded to superior force, while the Lipka folk followed them to the edge of the forest, threatening and shouting.

Others ran meantime about the clearing to put out the fires and throw down the piles of timber which had begun to rise; the women (Kozlova leading them), having seen at the edge of the clearing several boarded huts which had been set up, hastened to tear them down, and cast them about the woodland, that nothing of them might remain.

The woodmen having been so easily put to flight, Boryna called the farmers round him, urging them to come with him to the Squire and warn him against laying a finger on the forest until the law-courts should have decided what was to belong to the peasants. But ere they had settled what they should say, shrill screams were heard, and the women came fleeing away in great haste. Hard on a score of horsemen had entered on the scene, and were riding them down.

Notice had been given to the manor, which had accordingly at once dispatched these men to protect the woodcutters.

The steward was riding at the head of a lot of farm-servants. They made straight for the clearing and, falling upon the women whom they met first, set to horsewhipping them soundly. The steward, a burly wild-ox sort of man, rode first at them, shouting:

"Ah, the thieves, the lousy thieves! Thrash 'em! Bind 'em! To jail with 'em!"

"Rally, rally round me, boys! Stand up to them!"

roared Boryna. His men, panic-stricken, had begun to run; but at the sound of his voice they flew to his side, protecting their heads with their arms as they ran.

"Cudgel those sons of dogs, and keep your flails for the horses!" Boryna commanded, and, wild with fury, snatching up a stake at hand, rushed forward, striking hard and aiming well. And after him, like a wood shaken by some angry blast, the peasants charged on in close order, pitchforks and flails almost touching, and uttered a terrible cry as they dashed in amongst the manor servants; they smote and lunged boldly, and their flails rattled and clattered as handfuls of peas flung down on a wooden flooring.

A horrible uproar arose, with fearful oaths, and the whinnying of belaboured horses, and the groans of wounded men, and the hoarse noises of the struggling, and the battle-cries!

The manor people held out stoutly, with imprecations and blows as vigorous as those of the peasants; but at last they were forced back in confusion: under the strokes of the flails, the horses reared, squealing shrilly with pain, and fled with their riders. The steward, perceiving this, made his horse stand upright, broke into the mass of Boryna's men, and made for their leader. But this was his last effort: a score of flail-strokes were aimed at him, as many foes closed upon him instantly, and as many hands seized him, pulling him off his horse. Tossed like a bush that a spade has uprooted, he flew into the air, to come down on the snow at their feet, insensible. With difficulty Boryna protected him, and dragged him off into a place of safety.

All then became a whirling mass of men; the tumult was ear-splitting, and the eddying mingled throng so dense that nothing could be made out, save tangled groups of fighters, rolling in the snow—fists lifted and falling in passionate exasperation—and sometimes one or another would burst from the scrimmage and run madly away for a few yards—only to run back to the fight again, shouting and raging as before.

There were hand-to-hand fights, there were mass attacks; men were seized by the throat or by the hair of the head, and they tore at each other like wild beasts. Yet neither could get the upper hand. The manor servants, having alighted from their horses, gave ground no longer; the woodmen, besides, now came to their help with sturdy assistance: the men of Rzepki especially were foremost, rushing to their rescue in silence, like savage dogs that only bite. Moreover, the leader of them all was now the forester, who had but just arrived: a man of gigantic size, who dearly loved a fight, and had, besides, many a bone to pick with the Lipka folk. He darted onward, fighting alone against multitudes, cracking their skulls with the butt of his gun, and making them fly on every side: a scourge to them all, and a terror.

Staho Ploshka stood firm to stay his advance, for the people was already beginning to flee before him; but, seized by the throat, whirled in air, and dashed down like a sheaf of threshed corn, he remained unconscious on the ground.—One of the Vahniks then leaped forward and brought down his flail on the giant's shoulder with a smashing blow—only to get such a hit between the eyes that he called out, "Jesus!" and, opening his arms wide, fell stunned.

Now could Matthew bear it no longer, and came up to attack him. Yet, although in physical strength not inferior to Antek, he could not withstand the forester for a minute. This one was far the stronger, and beat him, and rolled him in the snow, and forced him to take to his heels: after which, he made for Boryna. But, ere he could reach him, he was assailed by a host of women, who flung themselves on him with shrieks, clawed his face, pulled out his hair by handfuls, and, piling themselves one upon the other, bore him to the earth along with them: like a lot of curs attacking a shepherd's dog, plunging their fangs in his flesh, and dragging him this way and that way.

Thenceforth did the Lipka folk begin to have the upper hand. Both parties were in close conflict, mingled like fallen

leaves; and each man chose his opponent, throttling and lugging him through the snow: while the women hung on the flanks of the battle, and tore at the enemies' hair.

And now the confusion was such that one could scarcely distinguish friend from foe. . . . In the end, the manor servants were beaten completely. Some lay bleeding; some, sorely bruised and exhausted, made off through the forest. Only the woodmen defended themselves to the uttermost; for certain amongst them had begged for mercy, which the people, still more exasperated against them than against those from the manor, and inflamed with anger as a resin-torch burning in a gale, were but little disposed to grant, and thrashed them most unmercifully.

Sticks and flails and pitchforks were now thrown aside, and they wrestled together, man to man, fist to fist, brute strength pitted against brute strength; crushing, tearing, wallowing on the ground! And there was no longer any noise of cries, but only low groans, curses, and the panting of the stubborn fight.

A tremendous day it was, a day of wrath.

The people seemed to have lost their heads, so greatly were they all infuriated by conflict. Kobus in particular, and Kozlova, looked like demented creatures, horrible to see, covered with blood and bruises, yet still attacking any number of enemies single-handed.

So the men of Lipka now set up a mighty cry, and rushed together to assault those who still resisted, one of them now putting to flight ten enemies, and following on the heels of those who fled.—Just then the forester, who had by now freed himself from the women's attack, but was very sore and all the more furious, shouted to rally his men. At the same instant, perceiving Boryna, he flew at him! Each grappled the other with a formidable hug, like two bears at odds, pushing, swaying, striking one another against the trees of the forest, at the verge of which they had arrived. . . .

It was then that Antek came up; he had been much

delayed on his way, though he had hurried so that he was forced to rest awhile to take breath, and also to see how things fared with his father.

The forester had the advantage. True, it was no easy matter, for he was much exhausted, and the old man fought a good fight. Again and again, both fell down, and rolled about like rival dogs, and bruised each other on the ground. But Boryna now was more and more frequently undermost; his cap had fallen off, and his white head was again and again battered against the gnarled roots of the trees.

Antek glanced round a second time, drew the gun from under his sheepskin, crouched down to take aim, and—crossing himself mechanically!—levelled the weapon at his father's head! But before he could pull the trigger, both combatants had risen to their feet, Antek rose likewise, and his barrel pointed straight at his father. . . . But no shot came.—A sense of unspeakable horror had entered his heart: he could hardly draw breath for the pain of it. His hands shook as with an ague; all his body trembled; a mist veiled his eyes. Then, suddenly, a short piercing shriek burst forth.

"Killed! I'm killed!"

The forester had just clubbed Boryna with his gunstock. The blood spurted; the old man threw up his arms and fell headlong to the ground.

Antek, flinging his gun away, sprang to his father's side, whose breath rattled in his throat. The skull was terribly injured; he still was alive, but his eyes stared glassily, and his feet moved with continuous jerks.

"My father! O Jesus! my father!" he exclaimed at the top of his voice. Taking up the insensible body, he pressed it to his bosom, and cried again, in tones of despair:

"My father! they have slain him . . . slain him!" And his voice was the howl of a wild beast that has lost her cubs.

Several men who were close by came to Boryna's aid, placed him upon a litter of boughs, applied snow to his wounded head, and assisted him to the best of their knowl-

edge. Antek had sat down on the ground, tearing his hair and crying out as one mad:

"They have killed him . . . killed him!" till the folk began to think him really distracted.

Suddenly he stopped.—All came upon him in a flash: he at once darted upon the forester with such a shriek of rage, with such a rabid glare in his eyes, that the latter trembled and would have fled. Soon aware, however, that flight could not save him, he turned and fired, so close that Antek's face was blackened with powder. By some miracle, he missed—and the avenger was on him like a thunderbolt.

Resistance, attempts to escape, prayers for mercy forced from him by despair and fear of death, were all in vain. Antek's clutch was the grip of a maddened wolf. He throttled him till the gristle of his windpipe cracked, then whirling him on high, thrashed a tree with his body until the breath was quite beaten out of it.

Then he began to fight the others. Wherever he appeared, all fled before him terrified: so fearful was he to behold, smeared with his father's blood and with his own, bare-headed, with matted hair, livid as a corpse—a portentous monster of superhuman strength! Almost by himself, he struck down and put to flight such as yet resisted; and, in the end, they were forced to calm him and hold him back, or he would have beaten all the hostile party to death.

All was over. Those of Lipka, though bleeding from many a wound, now filled the wood with triumphant cries.

The women tended the more grievously wounded, and placed them on sledges. They were not a few. One of Klemba's sons had a broken arm; Andrew Paches' leg, too, was broken; he could not walk, and screamed as they bore him off. Kobus was unable to move for the blows he had got; Matthew was spitting blood, and his loins hurt him exceedingly. Others also were in as evil plight almost. Scarcely one had come unscathed out of the encounter; but—they were victorious! So, caring no whit for their wounds, they set up joyful deafening shouts as they prepared to return.

Boryna was lifted into his sledge, and driven slowly, for fear he should die on the road. He remained unconscious: gore oozed from under the bandages, falling into his eyes and running down his cheeks, which were white as a dead man's.

Antek walked beside the sledge, gazing on his father with eyes full of dismay. When the ground was rough, he held his head up gently; from time to time he would murmur low, in a tone of infinite sorrow:

"My father! O God! my father!"

The folk went home as best they could, in disorderly groups of threes and fours, among the trees, for the roadway was taken up by the sledges. Now and then a deep groan was heard; but most of them laughed boisterously, with merry shouts. And they talked and talked, relating episodes of the fight, priding themselves on their victory, and deriding the vanquished. Songs, too, and deafening whoops reverberated through the woodland. They were all intoxicated with victory, and more than one staggered along, stumbling over roots or jostling the trunks of trees.

Blows and fatigue were all forgotten; their hearts, elated with the ineffable glory of success, swelled with enthusiasm, and felt the force to withstand the whole world, if it opposed. Nay! get the better of it, too!

On they trooped in noisy bands, with flashing glances at the forest—theirs by right of conquest!—And it waved above them and rustled and shed on their heads its dew of melted frost, as if it were weeping over them.

Suddenly Boryna opened his eyes, gazing long at Antek, and seemingly unable to believe his senses. Then a deep calm joy overspread his features; twice he opened his mouth to speak, and at last with a great effort succeeded in whispering:

"Is it you, son? is it you?"

And he relapsed into lethargy.

END OF PART II